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ABSTRACT

A study explored why differential learner performance exists across work-based learning providers. Attention focused on retention, achievement, and completion as key indicators of work-based learning performance. Findings showed providers should encourage take-up by learners; provide a process to get learners started; provide teaching and learning support activities; promote completion of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) certification and framework achievement; and should provide leadership and management. The nine-page report is followed by a list of key areas for provider improvement and discussion that expands upon them. Suggestions included the following: reach out to learners and employers, shift perceptions, use local labor market information, work closely with employers, focus on recruitment and initial assessment, give good advice, work with learners, maximize retention, develop staff and build effective partnerships. Each section highlights practices working for providers involved in the study; lists key messages relating to the topic; and suggests ways to take it forward. A summary makes these recommendations for maximizing performance: making the investment, setting priorities and timescales, short-term priorities, mid-term adjustments, and long-term strategy. An interview schedule and 12 references are appended. (YLB)

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Making the difference

Provider support for learner retention and achievement in work-based learning

Vikki Smith
and Maria Hughes

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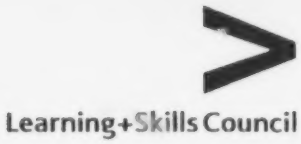

Making the difference

Provider support for learner retention and achievement in work-based learning

Vikki Smith
and Maria Hughes

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Introduction

Why does differential learner performance exist across work-based learning providers? In 2002, the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) set out to explore this very issue. York Consulting Limited was commissioned to undertake the research and identify the characteristics and activities of work-based learning providers that were associated with good learner performance.

Any study of learner outcomes cannot be divorced from the context it operates within. The post-compulsory sector is a dynamic environment where change is inevitable and continuous. Recent times have seen a heightened interest in quality improvement in work-based learning. The advent of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has seen focused efforts on establishing new ways of working and funding. Similarly, the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) has taken over the inspection regime of the Training Standards Council (TSC). Furthermore, providers have been challenged to adjust to the application of the Common Inspection Framework. At the same time providers have also had to respond to, for example, the introduction of key skills tests and, more recently, technical certificates, both of which present further challenges to work-based learning providers in the short term. In response, providers need to plan for quality improvement so that they are better able to respond to the raft of initiatives taking place and the burgeoning requirements that they bring.

What is clear is that the stakes are high for providers; those who are most effective in ensuring and demonstrating that they deliver quality and performance will be best placed to take advantage of future opportunities and developments.

This publication is based on the results of research with practitioners, focusing on how providers address performance issues and what works for them. What became evident was that the better performing providers included in this study were simply 'doing things better' across the board, as opposed to tweaking and adjusting one or two areas of their practice. This was not a happy accident; they were succeeding because they were consciously and consistently seeking quality and performance from everything they did. It is the mix of measures that was effective in maximising performance. This report will illuminate some of the practices seen to be working for the providers involved in this study.

The context

For the purposes of this study, provider performance is measured in terms of learner outcomes. Three simple indices are used – retention rates, NVQ certification rates and full framework (Modern Apprenticeship, MA) achievement. 'Good provider performance' in this context therefore refers to providers with relatively high retention and achievement rates, the latter differentiating between NVQs and full framework achievement.

This being the case, the research focused mainly on delivery of Foundation Modern Apprenticeships (FMAs) and Advanced Modern Apprenticeships (AMAs), based on frameworks incorporating NVQs at Level 2 and Level 3 respectively.

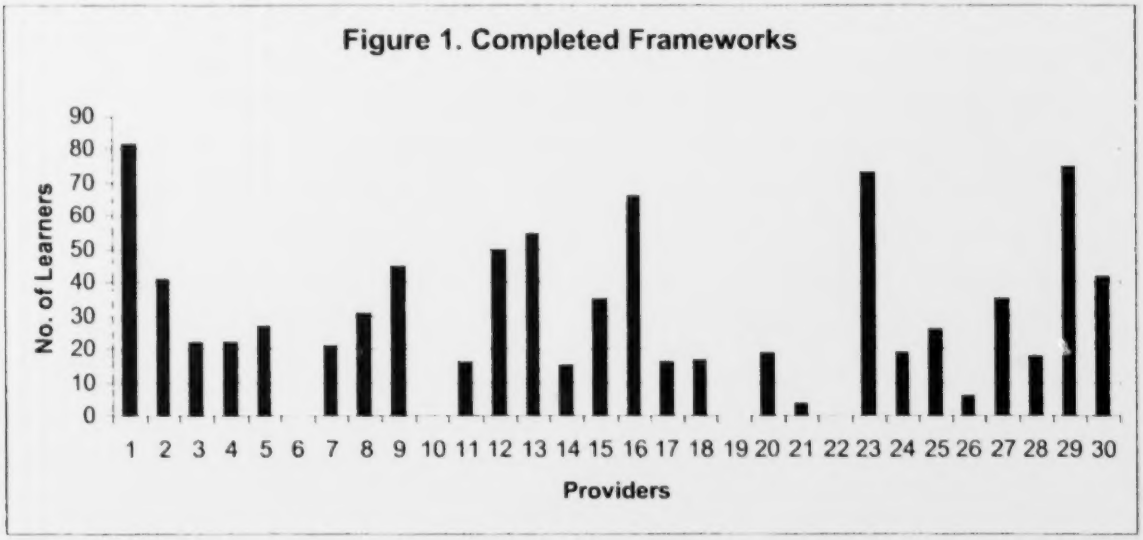
Performance issues

National data is available from the Work-based Learning Young People Trainee Database, which collects data from the LSC's follow-up survey of leavers. Data is published by the DfES as a Statistical First Release (DfES SFR 2002). The latest figures show that, on the basis of survey responses, *45% of leavers from FMA* during 2000/01 received an NVQ at Level 2 or above. For *AMAs, 49% of leavers* during the same period received an NVQ at Level 3 or above. For work-based learning as a whole (including other, non-MA training), 53% of leavers in the year received full qualification. (There has been improvement over time; for example, the longer established AMA has steadily increased in terms of Level 3 qualifications from 27% in 1997/8.) What these figures do tell us is that there is still ample room for improvement.

Data from one LSC area for 2000/01 showed that NVQ certification rates for that area were similar to the national rate at 46%.

Figure 1 shows combined AMA and FMA achievement rates for 30 providers in this locality. Achievement rates for the full framework varied widely from 0 to 82%. The mean across these providers is 27% – fewer than 30% of learners completing the full MA framework.

Figure 1. Completed Frameworks



Other analysis undertaken by York Consulting Limited showed that providers who supported a high proportion of learners through to NVQ certification also tended to be good at 'converting' these to framework achievements (York Consulting Limited 2002).

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However, around 15% of learners were dropping out after receiving their NVQ but before achieving the MA. A cautionary note here is that numbers of learners for individual providers were small.

Learners who do not achieve, generally speaking, have left the programme before reaching the point of submitting their work for assessment for the NVQ, or have not completed within the specified time.

Using data from the same LSC area, but for the period March 2001 to May 2002, the proportion of leavers from both programmes who were recorded as not completing their frameworks *and* not receiving an NVQ were analysed. This represented *63%* of all leavers in the period, indicating a significant retention problem for providers in this area, as in others.

This data indicates why national and local attention is focusing on retention, achievement and completion as key indicators of work-based learning performance.

External factors influencing retention and achievement

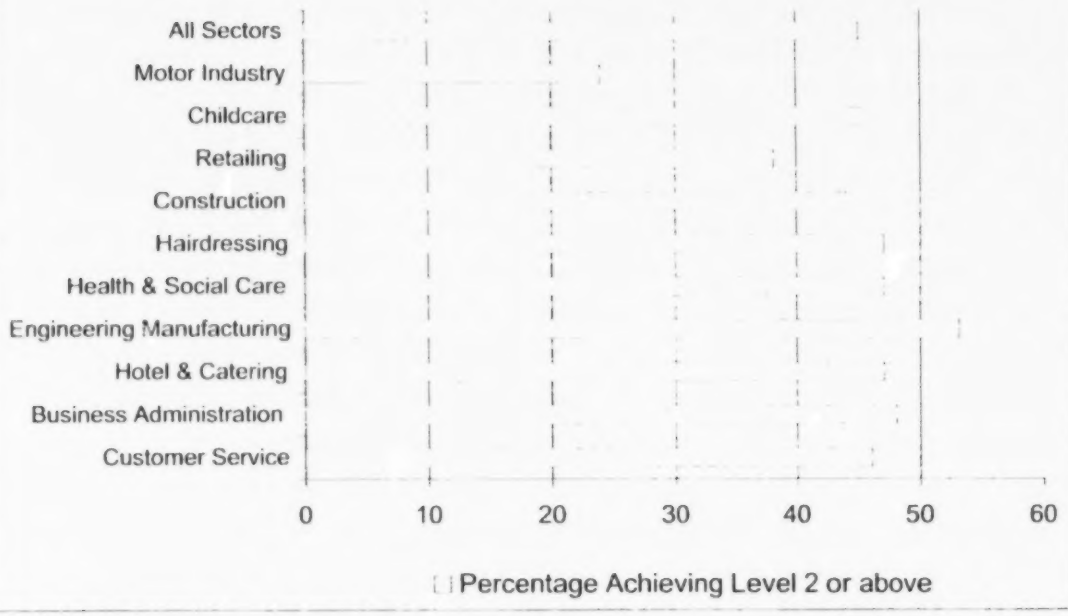
It is important to acknowledge that many factors influence learner performance, not all of which are under the control of the provider. These may include:

- the tradition of training within the sector(s) covered by the provider's programmes
- the local labour market and learning culture
- local employers (eg their size and propensity to train)
- learner and potential learner profiles (eg prior achievements)
- location and access issues
- the frameworks and qualifications available in sectors covered
- LSC policy and funding regimes
- competitive conditions
- skills available to providers in the labour market.

Such issues may be reflected in attainment of qualifications by sector, using national data (DfES SFR 2002). Figure 2 shows the percentage of leavers obtaining full qualifications at Level 2 or above, for FMA programmes in 10 key sectors, 2000/01; what it does illustrate is that nationally learners in engineering and manufacturing are more likely to obtain qualifications than those in, for example, retailing or the motor industry.

This national variation in achievement by sector reflects a range of factors. For example, employers in engineering and manufacturing generally have a tradition of apprenticeship training. Their culture and working practices are therefore more likely to support learners effectively, and the achievement of an apprenticeship is widely seen as a precondition for successful progression in the sector. By contrast, many firms in the motor industry may be small, local operations where experience and some informal evidence of competence are seen as more important passports into jobs than formal qualifications. In these cases, learners may have little to lose by moving from one employer to another without completing their learning programmes, particularly where there is competition for experienced labour.

Figure 2. Level 2 Qualifications by Sector 2000/01



This has important implications for the design of any study that seeks to ascribe the performance of individual providers to factors intrinsic to the provider organisation and delivery. It is likely that some differences in performance between any two providers can be attributed, not to the practices of the providers in question, but to these external factors, especially if the providers are working with different learner groups in different industrial sectors.

This given, there are still differences in the outcomes achieved by learners with different providers where the same conditions are in evidence. This study is concerned to identify how providers *can* make a difference, despite the external constraints they may face, and how they maximise the achievements of their learners.

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The research

The overall question asked at the outset of the research was 'why do some learners achieve while others with similar backgrounds and in similar circumstances do not?'

To address this all-embracing question two discrete stages were implemented.

Stage One of the study considered those factors that might affect successful completion, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative methods. A seminar was held at the start of the work to discuss the research aims and approach with LSC work-based learning programme managers from most LSCs across the East and West Midlands. This was followed by visits to selected LSCs to discuss issues in more detail. In addition, a telephone survey of 45 providers was conducted in these two regions, to obtain their views on the issues and to collect examples of successful solutions. One local LSC provided additional data from its area that allowed local figures to be compared with national data sets.

This first stage of the study laid the basis for the more detailed qualitative work of **Stage Two**, which involved seven providers in one LSC area. As far as possible, providers with similar overall characteristics, but which displayed differential performance profiles, were compared. This approach was designed to help isolate the internal, provider-led factors associated with performance. A questionnaire was prepared in the form of a 'Challenge Framework', which explored a complex series of issues, with prompts for interviewers (see Appendix A).

A series of field visits explored the performance issues and provider responses in more detail, via intensive interviews with provider managers and staff, learners and employers. (One provider was visited twice, in order to compare and contrast issues and practice in two areas of learning.) Input from the LSC helped in the interpretation of the research results.

The aim was to select providers with similar characteristics, in order to minimise the effect of external factors on their performance. Practice within these providers forms the basis of the research findings and allows the exploration of what constitutes effective practice in terms of learner performance. The examples provided and the conclusions drawn capture the key points for consideration by providers wishing to improve learner retention and achievement.

Summary of findings

The main findings generated out of the research are noted below.

Encouraging take-up by learners

Encouraging take-up by learners is a fundamental task for all providers. For successful providers this is an active process where they are full partners with learners, employers and other stakeholders in encouraging take-up by learners. Providers should:

- provide prospective learners with full information to generate awareness and appreciation of the work-based learning option
- ensure that the images conveyed by marketing, materials and premises are positive, professional and learner friendly
- start the process of engaging employers via early contact and discussion
- work with careers staff and Connexions to make their knowledge and expertise available to potential recruits
- understand the local labour market as a basis for advising learners and planning appropriate provision
- work to change perceptions of work-based learning as a 'fallback option' for young people.

Getting learners started

Once the interest of learners in a particular programme has been secured, providers need to drive forward a sequence of events from initial learner awareness to effective induction to programmes. Providers should:

- build motivation and aspiration in the learner throughout the process
- maximise the chance of retention and achievement by ensuring learners are placed on the right programme, at the right level, with corresponding and appropriate work-based learning opportunities
- match learner and employer needs and aspirations
- make the employer and the job part of one package with work-based learning
- value employer time highly and use it effectively
- plan what needs to be done, when and by whom (ie learner, provider and employer) to ensure transparency in the work-based learning process
- maximise the initial assessment and induction process – employ formalised but flexible systems to cater to learner requirements
- implement and support equality and inclusion strategies.

Teaching and learning

Work-based learning is better supported if teaching and learning support activities are provided which add training relating to specific work tasks, build basic and key skills, and develop underpinning knowledge. To be effective in these tasks providers need to:

- ensure employers provide work release time for learners (where possible employers should agree to this commitment; this can be promoted to employers in the context of the benefits it will bring to the workplace)
- make employers aware of the implications of making insufficient learning time available to their trainees

- offer flexible learning and teaching opportunities to learners outside their working hours
- promote learning as the vehicle for success, rather than assessment
- employ a variety of delivery strategies in different environments to maximise learning opportunities
- have a clear strategy for full framework achievement and ensure that both the learner and employer have signed up to this
- have realistic expectations for all parties, but devise processes for helping employers and learners meet these expectations.

NVQ certification and framework achievement

'Converting' NVQ attainment into completion of the framework and achievement of the full MA is a problematic area for many providers.

In order to promote completion, providers should:

- place strategic planning as the core requirement for the delivery of key skills and for technical certificates
- establish procedures for capturing and promoting progress; these should be made explicit to learners (and employers) from the outset as they can act as a catalyst for achievement
- provide support structures to help learners make the transition from one programme to the next
- celebrate success and share these stories to motivate others.

Leadership and management

Inspections and commentaries place considerable emphasis on provider leadership and management. This research supports this assumption and validates the notion that the management and culture of the organisation are important factors underlying successful performance. Consistency in the delivery of effective support to learners requires a range of leadership and management directives. These include use of:

- proactive retention means and measures
- a range of strategies to counter periods of early dropout indicated by management information systems
- approaches that allow learners to gain some recognition for what they have achieved; this has the potential to encourage a return to learn and boost confidence and morale
- continuous professional development for staff to maximise successful learner outcomes; this can also engender a sense of loyalty in staff and promote staff retention
- formalised subcontractor relationships and common approaches to quality assurance
- creative delivery of learning; working in collaboration with other stakeholders can sustain current ventures and provide new opportunities
- keeping up to date with current and pending developments in the field
- as a provider, adopting a process of reflective practice as a means of securing continuous improvement.

Summary: maximising performance

The range of measures and good practice identified illustrates that there is no single measure by which all providers can improve retention and achievement. This is a continuous process, which needs to examine and work on all aspects of the learners' experience, and reflects the work of the whole provider team. This process is likely to involve ongoing investment by the provider.

In the **short term** (the current year) providers can maximise performance by focusing on the following areas:

- specific actions to retain learners (eg identifying those at risk of dropping out and responding to that prior to it coming to fruition)
- initial assessment and planning which focuses on understanding and meeting learner needs (eg matching learner needs, desires and requirements to the programme of learning they enter)
- induction which gives the learner the necessary information to provide a clear view of his or her work-plan and responsibilities
- effective key skills training which is not seen as irrelevant by learners or employers; this could, for example, mean the wholesale integration of key skills and/or the adoption of a project-based approach to key skills attainment
- teaching and learning which has a rationale which is clear to the learner, is delivered by appropriate methods, and which links to workplace activities
- effective support to learners which responds to additional learning and support needs
- close cooperation with employers
- good assessment and verification.

In the **mid-term** providers can consider more far-reaching alterations and/or the implementation of broader changes. This may, for example, include:

- alterations to job roles and descriptions
- the implementation of retention or equal opportunities monitoring and analysis systems
- the more systematic identification of factors which support or prevent successful completion
- consultation on and development of formal procedures to bring about improvement.

Longer-term actions will be designed to establish performance review and improvement as a core team activity, using the lessons learned from short-term work. This is likely to take place over one or more years of operation, in the initial development and assessment phase, and then on an ongoing basis with regular reviews and adjustments. Within this, specific strands of action are likely to address structural issues such as:

- redesign of programmes to integrate key skills and/or incorporate new teaching and learning approaches
- new training and qualifications programmes for staff
- establishment of data collection and analysis systems to support retention and quality assurance work (eg earlier leaver questionnaires and/or feedback processes)
- new management and two-way team communication arrangements to facilitate the speed, accuracy and effectiveness of organisational response

- planning resources and the establishment of the necessary commercial foundation for new investments
- strategic adjustments such as diversification into new occupations or areas of learning, formation of alliances or consortia, or expansion onto new sites
- entry into provider networks or work with representative or developmental bodies, to enhance the organisation's wider presence and intelligence.

These will indicate that the task of performance improvement is not, ultimately, separable from the overall organisational strategy, and needs to be seen in this context.

Key areas for provider improvement

The research generated a vast array of material. Good practice linked to better performance embraced one or more of the following features:

- more learner-oriented recruitment, assessment and assignment
- better availability of training ('release') time; more frequent and reliable provider contact with learners
- a higher degree of integration of key skills
- more effective staff recruitment, development and retention
- better engagement of employers in the learning process
- focused, systematic and proactive learner retention processes
- in general, more consistency in the implementation of processes across the team and over time.

Expansion of the points above can be found in the sections that follow.

Encouraging take-up by learners

Encouraging take-up by learners is a fundamental task for all providers. For successful providers this is an active process where they are full partners with learners, employers and other stakeholders in encouraging take-up by learners.

Reaching learners and employers

Successful providers are keenly aware of perceptions of their image both locally and nationally, and take steps to build a positive awareness of their work among prospective learners and partners. This is seen as a first step in securing participation. A key facet of this is the provision of effective information, advice and guidance to learners, and in setting learner perceptions and expectations. Methods used to generate awareness and promote a positive image include:

- websites
- school visits
- outreach events such as stands in shopping malls
- careers fairs
- careers service/Connexions links
- press releases, advertisements and posters
- newsletters and mailings (including e-communications)
- open days.

Getting the work-based learning message across

Provider G has recently changed its marketing approach to include more extensive visits to schools and more face-to-face liaison with teachers and other professionals. The aim is to improve the presentation and availability of information on work-based options to young people, with a view to establishing appropriate expectations while also encouraging aspiration in programme entrants.

For most providers, the relationship with local information, advice and guidance providers is a vital part of this work. Good communication and exchange of information is key to ensuring that learners receive accurate and appropriate messages and are referred accordingly.

The provider's presentation of itself will also be important in setting expectations and quality standards. Some of the providers in this study have begun to make more effective use of their office locations through more visible and 'user friendly' window and board advertising, with a plan to also make premises more inviting and welcoming.

Providers are increasingly aware that they are competing for learners who have college or sixth form options; options that are more familiar to learners and their parents. Providers find it effective to target their messages to potential recruits who want to undertake specific vocational programmes, who wish to combine workplace experience with study, and/or who are likely to benefit from less academically oriented forms of learning.

Shifting perceptions

Providers E, F and H are beginning to present their 'offer' along the lines of 'it's as good as but not like school at all'. They believe this will help to promote the vocational route, shift perceptions and raise the profile of work-based learning as a viable alterative to academic study.

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Shifting perceptions and raising the profile of work-based learning can come from myriad sources. Taking the message of the potential of work-based learning to stakeholders enables providers to tap into various groups and meetings. For example, Provider C gave a presentation to a local childcare employer forum meeting; as a result one employer contacted them directly to pursue offering work-based learning for their employees.

Using local labour market information

Some providers have conducted research in their catchment areas to identify and assess learning needs and demand. This can be supplemented with local labour market information from sources such as the local Learning and Skills Council, Chambers of Commerce, local authorities, Sector Skills Councils and Regional Development Agencies. The information provides a basis for determining both longer-term strategies (for sectoral and programme developments) and shorter-term recruiting and operational priorities.

Working with employers

Providers need to promote themselves to employers as well as to learners and learner-related organisations in order to secure work placements or recruit employees to their programmes. This can benefit learner retention and achievement by widening the range of job options open to learners, and by laying the basis for good relationships between providers and employers. The more proactive provider will use various measures to identify prospective employers, such as scanning local media for information on new or expanding firms, or contacting firms directly to offer training to existing or new employees. The challenge, then, is to establish a mutual and effective working relationship with those employers.

Building long-term employer relationships

Provider B has been recruiting on behalf of a local marketing relations company for a number of years, providing them with groups of applicants that the company test, interview and select from. The employer finds this to be an effective recruitment mechanism, as the provider 'knows the type of person and the skills we are looking for'.

Some providers also act as recruitment agencies. This provides an additional source of contact with potential learners, either as applicants for advertised vacancies, or as people seeking work more generally. It also provides a further basis for a good relationship with employers and a sound understanding of recruitment and training needs.

Early contact with employers

Provider G also acts as a recruitment agency and has a specialist call centre with dedicated sales agents whose role is to 'sell' the business case for participation. There has been a recent push towards quality dialogue between employers and provider staff and the plan is to extend this to the more sales-orientated aspects of their work in order to boost employer participation.

Provider H employs staff specifically to ensure effective early dialogue with employers via visits to explain the programme as well as to assess their suitability vis-à-vis health and safety, equal opportunities and grievance policies.

Having dedicated and/or specialist liaison staff to manage the relationships with employers is far easier for larger providers. It does not, however, have to be the

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preserve of larger providers; smaller providers can also adopt such an approach. One possible way forward would be to set aside time and to train staff to make and maintain 'pre-sales' employer contacts as part of a wider range of activities.

Marketing to local employers

Provider A runs regular breakfast seminars for employers, based at hotels around the area. Agendas mix items on local business issues or developments, with case studies showing employer benefits of work-based learning programmes, service descriptions, or news on future developments. There are also opportunities for employers to network and to discuss their own training and development issues.

Key messages for encouraging take-up by learners

- Provide prospective learners with full information to generate awareness and appreciation of the work-based learning option.
- Ensure that the images conveyed by marketing, materials and premises are positive, professional and learner friendly.
- Start the process of engaging employers via early contact and discussion.
- Work with careers staff and Connexions to make their knowledge and expertise available to potential recruits.
- Understand the local labour market as a basis for advising learners and planning appropriate provision.
- Work to change perceptions of work-based learning as a 'fallback option' for young people.

Taking it forward

Providers can make available to parents, teachers and careers staff descriptions of programmes, entry requirements, the types of young people likely to benefit, and information on career progression opportunities.

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Getting learners started

Once the interest of learners in a particular programme has been secured, providers need to drive forward a sequence of events from initial learner awareness to effective induction to programmes. The rationale for adopting these systems and procedures is to ensure that the learner's perceptions of the programme, and his/her expectations, are realistic, and for the provider to take crucial decisions about the approach that is most likely to lead to retention and achievement for each learner. This section explores these processes and looks at some approaches adopted by providers to support learners.

Recruiting and initial assessment

Once appropriate awareness and interest is established, the subsequent recruitment and assessment processes are important in confirming and strengthening the initial interest. For the provider these processes are key in that they enable staff to achieve a good understanding of the learner's needs, and are the basis for programme design.

Listening and understanding

Most providers will describe the recruitment process in terms of formal procedures such as assessment, application of any selection criteria, and induction. Good providers also remember that the first and central task is to get to know and to understand the potential learner. This is the foundation of successful recruitment and forms the basis for successful retention of the learner thereafter. As one of those interviewed observed:

> *It is vital to start by listening carefully and observing carefully, to form a picture of the person as a whole. Otherwise there is a danger you will just slot people into preset pigeonholes. You need to understand what that person is looking for, what makes them tick and therefore how likely they will be to succeed in a given programme or job.*

An informal component

Providers H and E use a 'getting to you know you' period as a feature of their assessment of the learner. They believe that they can understand some things about the learner and their learning through this activity that may not be ascertained through formal assessment arrangements. Moreover, the informality and relaxed atmosphere of such activities help to resolve issues and ease retention and achievement.

Initial assessment

Beyond this assessment of the person as a whole, there is obviously a need for more formal initial assessments. Initial assessment is important in supporting learner retention and achievement because, for example, it identifies any skill deficiencies which may affect the learner's progress, or any potential for faster progress – it is the basis for programme planning. Provider practice in this area varies widely; some of this variation may reflect differing programme or employer needs, but in general the better performing providers tend to conduct more thorough and formal assessments including:

- assessment of key and basic skills
- prior qualifications and accreditation of prior learning
- personal attitudes, attributes and aptitudes

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- occupationally specific tests such as manual dexterity or colour perception, wherever relevant
- psychometric testing.

Points mean programmes

Provider C uses a quiz as part of the initial assessment. The questions refer to key units of the MA framework and the quiz uses occupationally relevant scenarios to test knowledge of the sector as well as key skills competency. The score on the quiz is used in conjunction with traditional initial assessment techniques to ensure that both the occupation and the level of the programme are right for the learner.

Linking provider and employer assessment

Provider A, who often acts as a recruiter for employers, works on each relevant case to link the provider assessment with the employer selection criteria and any internal assessment conducted by the employer. This enables all three parties – employer, provider and learner – to be confident that the opportunity is real and appropriate to their needs, and to identify further training and development requirements for action planning.

Clear processes for initial assessment and subsequent use

Provider G has just implemented a new Key Learner Processes document. This is a detailed action plan that each local office must follow in order to ensure that quality is driven throughout the whole process. The document helps ensure that appropriate information is collected at initial assessment and that this information is fed through into the subsequent processes and structures. The provider sees this as a way of standardising activity in order to ensure improved achievement and retention.

Whatever the scope and nature of the assessment process, it is important that it should be used effectively. This means not simply recording the results, but using them to inform the learning plan, referring back at review points, and linking them to ongoing assessment at later points in the programme. In the best examples, the links are clear between assessment results and the detail of individual learning plans and targets. This is illustrative of the culture change that is required within the work-based learning sector, which needs to view learning, rather than assessment, as the driver for success.

Programme design and preparation

Providing a learner with the right programme at the right level is central if learners are to be placed into a situation whereby they are given the chance to succeed and achieve. A process of reviews can monitor the success of these strategies, and changes can be made if required. It is, however, far better to minimise such changes in order to avoid wasted effort or disaffection on the part of the learner. The importance of effective programme design and preparation for learning should therefore not be underestimated.

Sourcing opportunities – providing choice

One of the key uses of assessment results is in supporting the learner's choice of programme. For some providers with an occupational focus, this part of the choice may be a given, but the choice of programme level – AMA or FMA – is vital. Some

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providers also offer pre-MA programmes to prepare learners for employment and provide extra support on specific issues such as basic skills needs.

It is naturally helpful in promoting both learner and employer choice if there are sufficient job or placement opportunities to accompany a good range of potential learners. Learners with secure employment have an increased likelihood of staying in learning, especially when their employer is fully committed to the training programme. Some of the work undertaken by providers to identify job opportunities has already been described. It is true that for some providers working in fairly specialised occupational areas or sectors opportunities can be restricted at times by labour market conditions. For example, providers in manufacturing sectors have in recent years experienced difficulties as output has declined; this has led to fewer opportunities for new learners. These difficulties can be offset to some extent by diversification on the part of providers, or by increased cooperation between them.

Despite these difficulties, it is clearly important to provide the new learner with a programme that reflects his or her interests, aspirations and abilities. In this, as in earlier studies, learners have stressed the importance of 'having a choice' of programme, and the sense that they have made a positive decision to embark on a particular course of action. This will then facilitate the use of the job as a medium for learning, as discussed in later sections.

A range of options

Staff at Provider H make a concerted effort not to push particular courses on their learners, in the knowledge that this can hamper retention and achievement. As this is a multi-sector provider, they have the ability to offer learners a range of provision and maintain learner motivation and confidence. They have as a result, for example, been successful in engaging male learners in childcare.

Referral of non-recruits

Provider A recognises that not all potential learners will be suited to the programmes or jobs that it can offer. Learners requiring additional support over that which is offered may be referred to other providers who are more able to offer appropriate support. Similarly, if assessment shows that, though sufficiently skilled, the individual is more interested in entering alternative occupations or sectors, they may be referred to a provider better able to respond to their aspirations. The provider explains 'although this may be painful, in the long run it will save us, the learner, and the employer, a lot of frustration, and will probably reduce our non-completer numbers'.

Giving good advice – an informed decision

Faced with a number of choices of programme, level and job, it is important that the prospective learner is offered information and advice to support their decision-making. Thorough recruitment includes a discussion of the options and the advantages and disadvantages of each. This process includes provision of full information about the proposed jobs and learning programmes. Providers stress the importance of ensuring that both learners and employers understand the nature of the commitment that they are undertaking. They do this by explaining in detail their expectations of the learner.

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Open and informed discussion of learning options

Provider A presents detailed information on the learning programmes on offer, in a user-friendly format. There is always ample opportunity for discussion and clarification before a decision is taken. Parents are also encouraged to become involved in discussions and in supporting the final decision.

Matching opportunity and learner potential

As well as choosing the occupation, sector, level and programme, the learner and the provider will also need to think carefully about the locations of work and study, the nature of the employer organisation and the support required, as well as other aspects of the proposed programme in an attempt to match opportunities to learner potential. For some providers this has taken the form of a preparatory or taster programme.

Getting the programme right

A 'flexible arrangement' made by several providers is to run some sort of trial period for learners before they are formally registered onto the programme. For Provider H this trial lasted for the duration of one unit. During this process the provider could ascertain the speed at which the learner learnt, the types of teaching and learning that best suited them, the degree of support and engagement of the employer, the capacity of the learner to complete the unit, and the degree of help and support that they would need.

The appropriateness of the programme is not the only concern for providers. The work placement of learners is also crucial. The learning opportunities that can be provided with an employer must match the level of programme. More complex, however, is the need to match learners and employers based on preferred learning and working environments.

Early focus on job-readiness

Within Provider A, learners having the necessary aptitudes but who are not yet job-ready attend an initial training period. The training period focuses on acquiring a range of administrative and IT skills, includes work placements and provides an environment to spend time with the trainees and fully understand their support needs. The initial training period provides learners with an opportunity to find out whether a career in administration, for example, is appropriate for them. It also aims to increase their skills and confidence so that they can move into employment.

One provider explained that a particular employer would not be suitable for all recruits because of the nature of the workplace culture:

> *I would not send someone like [learner A] to that employer, not because he is incapable of doing that job, or because there is anything wrong with the employer, but because I don't think he would be happy in that social environment. They are very informal and you have to take them as they come … He [learner A] is not very socially confident yet and I think he would be better suited to a more formal office environment.*

Similarly, Providers E and F have 'walked away' from potential employers because those employers have failed to meet standards or have changed their attitude to work-based learning and the support they give to learners over time.

Locations are important because learners, particularly when younger, may find it difficult to sustain a commitment that involves extensive travelling, particularly where public transport is scarce or unreliable.

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It is also important to identify an appropriate duration for the programme, at the outset. Although this can be adjusted in line with later review findings, it provides the learner with a defined end point and avoids the perception that the programme is vague or indefinite in terms of its duration and ultimate aims. One provider with an impressive record for successful completion stressed the importance of this decision:

> *We never base the programme durations on the standard lengths of stay specified in contracts. Each individual is different and can work at his or her own pace. If you pressure them to work faster, they will have difficulties. But similarly, if you don't move them on fast enough, they can lose interest and feel they are getting nowhere. We aim to help them complete as soon as they are ready to do so.*

Securing a job

Prospective learners need to secure a job as well as a training place. Provider support throughout the job application process is key, particularly as learners may need more than one attempt to get a job, and may need to be encouraged to try again. For example, Provider E will help learners to find a job if they do not have one. They have established contacts with local employers who prefer to use them rather than the local Jobcentre. This relationship has evolved due to a thorough assessment procedure generating a perceived guarantee of quality candidates. In addition, Provider F will also help a learner to find work should they be laid-off during the course of the programme.

As a minimum, providers visit and 'vet' employers against standard criteria, and provide a pre-interview briefing to learners. Some, however, do much more to ensure that interviewees are well prepared, and that both the employer and the learner are likely to be happy with the eventual decision.

Supporting the job interview process

Provider A assigns an individual caseload of recruits to staff, who meet each of them regularly. They then liaise with recruiting employers to ensure they understand their needs fully. This informs interview preparation with prospective recruits, including practice of possible questions from both sides, and probable answers. If necessary, interview clothing can be lent to interviewees.

After the interview, the interviewee is debriefed and a questionnaire is sent to the employer to check the accuracy of information and the effectiveness of preparation.

Realistic planning

The individual learning plan should result from all the activities described above, and should be a realistic plan for the achievement of learning goals, attainment of qualifications *and* the completion of the MA framework, within the overall agreed duration. It is the key document to which the learner should be able to refer to check progress, and next steps.

Effective plans include:

- a clear rationale for the programme with links to initial assessment results, work activities, framework and employer requirements
- details of each component of the learning programme, how, where, when and by whom it is to be delivered, the expected outcomes and any assessments or tests involved; this should involve all aspects, including key skills development and any underpinning knowledge or additional employer elements

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- targets for the completion of specific tasks or demonstration of specific learning outcomes, by given dates, to act as milestones in marking learner progress or warning of difficulties
- review or checkpoints for evaluation or quality assurance.

Some providers link programmes to employer training or development activities, wherever appropriate. Even where these activities do not contribute directly to key vocational learning goals, they may provide opportunities to demonstrate key skills or to widen general knowledge and experience of the workplace and the sector. Plans may also include opportunities from informal work-based activities, such as clubs and teams, as well as from similar activities undertaken privately by learners.

The plan should be discussed with, and understood and agreed by, the learner before it is finalised. Most importantly, it should then be *used* and adjusted as necessary throughout the life of the programme. It should be a 'live' working document rather than simply a historical record of intentions at the outset.

Agreeing employer inputs and benefits

Establishing good communications with, and cooperation of, employers is key to supporting the learner's entry to the programme and sustaining their commitment to succeed.

Employers may undertake a range of roles; in some cases they are also the provider, in that they contract directly with the LSC to train their own staff. In almost all cases they provide some degree of internal induction and training, and thereafter supervision and liaison with the provider. Some employers also undertake internal assessment and verification. It is important that the nature of the employer's inputs to the learning programme is clear and agreed from the outset. The level of commitment on behalf of the employers must be explicit and agreed. Just as the learner must know what is expected of them, so must the employer.

In order to enhance provider and employer cooperation in supporting learners, some providers supply employer guides explaining the issues as a basis for these agreements. They will then meet with employer representatives, agree the approach and document these agreements as 'contracts' with varying degrees of formality. These contracts should include, or be supported by, clear descriptions and explanations of frameworks, programmes and processes. The employer should be able to refer to the guides as reminders, or use them to brief new members of supervisory staff when necessary.

Some providers go further than this:

> *We prepare customised employer guides for some of our larger employers who have a number of trainees on our programmes. This helps to underline that we value the close relationship and that our understanding of them, and their understanding of us, are both important.*

These documents and understandings should not describe a one-way process whereby the employer dutifully fulfils obligations to the learner and the provider; they should spell out the *benefits* available to employers as well as to individual learners and their teams. Like learners, employers need to be motivated to play their part effectively.

Some providers may be able to take advantage of useful sectoral characteristics. For example, certain sectors have more positive attitudes to training and qualifications, particularly where legislation requires minimum qualifications, as in the childcare and

social care sectors. In other cases, where there has been less of a training tradition or culture, it is recognised that building rapport and employer motivation may be much more difficult. This can impact on learner retention and achievement, and providers argue that any performance benchmarking or comparison should take account of these differing conditions.

Provider G has tried to circumvent this by building partnerships with larger national employers (with their own training activities) at a local level. They then aim to offer their training to complement the firm's in-house provision, and to share resulting case studies and good practice with other, less 'training oriented' employers as a means of encouraging take-up.

Providing first-hand experience

Provider C built shared commitment to lifelong learning by enrolling the manager of a nursery as an AMA. This enabled the manager to have a better understanding of what she was encouraging her trainees to undertake, to empathise with difficulties that they faced, and to become better able to provide opportunities to help the trainees build their evidence portfolios.

Encouraging shared commitment

In a number of cases, providers were well served by participatory employers who shared a commitment to lifelong learning. Line managers held meetings with learners to assess their portfolio and evidence gathering. Others would signpost particular activities as useful vehicles for key skills evidence. These supportive activities were enhanced if the line manager/mentor was involved in some form of lifelong learning (such as a Level 3 or 4 NVQ), where these activities would complement their own achievement. Likewise certain sectors with more rapid promotion paths (such as retail and childcare) also had the benefit of managers who had only recently been through the same training and could therefore relate to the activities.

Effective induction

Induction is the final major activity before the learner starts in earnest on the selected programme. Careful and thorough induction completes the picture for the learner and may include any or all of the following:

- rules for conduct and attendance
- payment and funding details
- details of the initial programme contents and activities
- health and safety
- equal opportunity policy (see further below)
- complaints, grievance, or harassment policies and procedures
- sources of support
- employer introductions and links to any employer induction processes.

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Reinforcing messages from induction

Provider A sees induction, like action planning, as an ongoing process between learner and tutor. At set points in each programme, learners are tested for recall of basic induction points such as health and safety rules and reasons for them. Where recall is poor, the induction process may be changed, and refresher information may be organised.

Supporting equality and inclusion

Equal opportunities practice ensures that all learners benefit from the same learning opportunities and work in an environment that is socially and culturally aware of diversity issues. Measures to ensure equality of opportunity will be crucial in supporting people who might otherwise be disadvantaged. Correctly implemented, they transmit to all learners an awareness of equality and inclusion issues, which is an important aspect of their development as employees. Table 1 summarises measures taken by providers and described during our fieldwork, in this area.

Table 1. Summary of equal opportunities measures

- Make equal opportunities policy explicit in marketing and recruitment materials and practice, and in early discussions.
- Target under-represented groups in marketing.
- Periodically review policies, check understanding and implementation, with learners and employers.
- Undertake regular policy reviews and adjustments.
- Distribute information on policies to staff and employers as well as learners.
- Refuse to work with questionable employers.
- Provide corrective visits and advice. Require employers to adopt provider policies unless have their own.
- Take action to widen participation in non-traditional occupations and vocational areas.
- Secure staff expertise with, for example, Braille and/or signing skills, or buy-in expertise in dyslexia assessments (some external/subscontracted).
- Meet cultural or faith needs (eg prayer room available).
- Make specific arrangements to speak to parents of potential female recruits from minority ethnic groups.
- Provide translated materials.
- Later, undertake in-programme questionnaires to check that learners remain aware of policies and procedures.
- Maintain regular review of relevant management information. Monitor assessed needs and performance of minority groups, and action taken.
- Benchmark against local statistics. Undertake consequent target setting, corporate and/or individual.
- Secure special resources for learners, for example those with disabilities (wheelchair access, large screens, special handsets, audio streams on websites and software packages).
- Identify and address discrimination, bullying or harassment.
- Provide special training/qualifications for staff on equal opportunities related delivery (eg C&G ESOL for young learners). Liaise with specialist bodies such as SENSE – distribute these tasks among staff.

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Key messages for getting learners started

- Build motivation and aspiration in the learner throughout the process.
- Maximise the chance of retention and achievement by ensuring learners are placed on the right programme, at the right level, with corresponding and appropriate work-based learning opportunities.
- Match learner and employer needs and aspirations.
- Make the employer and the job part of one package with work-based learning.
- Value employer time highly and use it effectively.
- Plan what needs to be done, when and by whom (ie learner, provider and employer) to ensure transparency in the work-based learning process.
- Maximise the initial assessment and induction process – employ formalised but flexible systems to cater to learner requirements.
- Implement and support equality and inclusion strategies.

Taking it forward

- To help learners be sure of their choice, offer 'Try-out' days or opportunities for work-shadowing tasters.
- Learners who have experienced unsuccessful interviews may need help in understanding why and in rebuilding their confidence for later attempts.
- Employers can be involved in initial assessment (especially for learners who are already employed when recruited) to support effective communication and avoid duplication of effort between the two parties.
- Sector Skills Councils have been tasked to develop 'regional networks of providers which are committed to meeting the needs of their sectors' (DfES 2002). Providers should work with the Sector Skills Councils, LSCs and employers to construct guidelines for initial assessment which reflect learner and employer needs and provide for commonality and transferability of assessment data.

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Teaching and learning

Introduction

While facilitating the learner's move into an appropriate programme will offer a good foundation for successful retention and achievement, once the learner is established on the programme the provider's task is different. It is to support – and sometimes to lead – the learner through the programme, using a variety of methods. In this section we focus on the training and support for learning delivered by providers.

Previous research (Hughes 2002) looked at the issue of teaching and learning in the context of falling inspection grades. The ALI Chief Inspector's Annual Report 2001–02 (ALI 2002) summarises the resulting hypothesis:

> *Work-based learning has gradually changed from assessment of competence at work to a programme of education and skill-training in the workplace, through the introduction of advanced, and then foundation, modern apprenticeships. This change ... had taken providers unawares, leaving many without the necessary skills to deliver GCE A-level-equivalent training.*
>
> (ALI 2002, Commentary: Diagnosing the Problem)

The learning delivered by providers may be divided into four functional types:

- training designed to complement vocational training received at work (eg to fill gaps where workplace training does not cover some competencies required within the framework, or where additional reinforcement is felt to be required)
- training which may not directly relate to the NVQ or framework, but is relevant to work tasks and requested by employers (eg telephone answering techniques)
- basic and key skills training
- delivery of underpinning knowledge, soon to be formalised as technical certificates; knowledge about the occupation, vocational area and sector, which provides a context for the acquisition and application of vocational skills.

These are not necessarily delivered separately – some providers, for example, integrate key skills training with other, vocational or underpinning exercises.

The following sections examine some of the issues associated with the effective delivery of teaching and learning support embodied in the types of teaching described above.

Winning learner time

Securing dedicated time away from work to undertake learning is a major problem for some providers. It can be difficult to persuade employers to allow trainees time off for training. In one case, a retail employer would not allow trainees any time other than short assessment interviews with provider staff that had to be carried out during tea- and lunch-breaks. Clearly, this makes the delivery of any significant training, for any purpose, extremely difficult, if not impossible, and will affect the performance of the learner.

In a contrasting case, a provider made it a condition of working with an employer that all trainees were allowed one half day a week away from the workplace for training. Employers unable or not willing to commit to this would not be used. For this provider it was an absolute precondition for achieving decent results for the learner and for itself as a provider organisation.

As with other issues, it is likely that the difficulty of securing learner time is greater in some sectors than in others. It is likely to be increasingly difficult where learners have direct customer contact, as absences can have an immediate affect on service levels. Retail was a particular concern in this respect. Smaller employers may also have particular difficulties in providing cover to allow trainees to take training time.

Where employers are still reluctant, and to overcome real operational difficulties, the provider may need to be flexible in terms of the time and location of learning. For example, Provider A offers open access to its premises during one evening of the week and on one Saturday of the month. A number of the workshop sessions delivered by Provider C are available during the day and during the evening at central locations to encourage learners to attend.

The employer as ally

Learners are likely to benefit where providers have established a close working relationship with their employers. This helps to ensure that the linkages between learning and work tasks are clear to the learner and that their aspirations and experiences in each area of activity are mutually reinforcing. For some providers this is a continuation of the activities established during the recruitment phase, with further employer events or newsletters used to promote communication.

Employers also recognise the importance of a good relationship with the training provider, based on communication and flexibility. As one of the employers interviewed observed:

> *I can contrast our experiences with two providers – our former one, and the one we are working with now. The first provider sent us a lower calibre of candidate for our vacancies – sometimes they were not skilled to the level we required. When we took a trainee and had any problems with them, we would inform the provider – they would acknowledge the problem but would not always do anything about it. While we could contact them, they did not always seem to be keen to spend time talking to us. Our current provider listens carefully to our requirements and sends us good people. We had a problem with one trainee on maths, and they sorted that out with some extra training in that area. For the first three months of a trainee's time with us they are on the phone almost weekly – we have established a good partnership based on a very open dialogue and their willingness to put on extra training if needed on Excel, Access, Word, telephone work, or the like.*

Where providers are willing to be flexible, employers may also be more likely to assist in supporting learners by changing routines or making extra resources available, as demonstrated below.

Encouraging employer flexibility

Provider F works with employers to encourage them to support their learners by a variety of means, such as:

- adjusting work activities to enable the development of skills and knowledge, which may then be assessed in areas not covered in mainstream work (eg by moving trainees to reception duties for short periods), with appropriate supported experience at the provider
- making workplace rooms/time available for portfolio building, tutor meetings etc

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- assigning mentors or coaches as well as supervisors
- providing witness testimony for portfolios
- linking progress to appraisals, internal courses and development programmes, pay and promotion.

Providers need to work closely with employers on individual cases, to communicate individual progress clearly, identify any difficulties or barriers, and work together to overcome these. Regular review meetings, supported by appropriate documentation, are the key to this process. Continuity of staff involvement on both sides is important, but is not always easy to achieve in fast-changing business and provider environments. For example, Provider G has had a history of high staff turnover and has just employed a number of new staff. This contrasts with Provider H, who although smaller, has much higher staff retention in this sector and who has also produced better learner retention and achievement rates. Although staff retention is affected by many factors, not all of which are within the control of the provider, there is a benefit to learners where providers can work to maximise staff stability and plan staff transitions carefully to ensure that learners do not experience gaps or a lowering in the quality of support.

One provider interviewed was particularly aware of the need to demonstrate progress and success to employers, and copies to them records of milestones achieved, with a congratulatory letter to the trainee. This helps to build a positive, forward-looking relationship involving all three parties and supports learner achievement.

Building on assessment and verification

Assessment and verification have long been established at the heart of work-based learning, and are important in securing retention and achievement. Nevertheless, they are often mentioned in inspection reports as areas of weakness.

> *There was insufficient assessment at work; too few work-based assessors; over-reliance on assessment of portfolios rather than a more balanced review of a range of indicators including, crucially, observation of working practice; and insufficiently systematic use of internal verification as a means of developing assessors' critical skills and evaluating their consistency of judgement.*
>
> (ALI 2002, Commentary: Assessment and Verification of Achievement)

From the learner viewpoint, poor assessment and verification can have a negative impact, particularly if they lead to the setting of tasks that the learner sees as repetitive or irrelevant. If assessment is inaccurate, there may be an assumption that the learner has demonstrated competencies where this is not in fact the case. There is then a danger that further learning will be affected because a necessary foundation of skill or knowledge has not been laid. Conversely, learner experiences of good assessment, where they understand the process and how it relates to their learning and career goals, can be helpful in maintaining focus and commitment.

In response to issues such as these, some providers offer employers training in work-based assessment and verification, as well as in coaching and mentoring. For all providers, good, documented systems for recording assessment and supporting verification are important. Clear advice and guidelines need to be provided to learners and to employers as well as to assessment and verification staff. It is important that learners understand assessment appeal procedures. One provider stressed that the provider's role in portfolio building should be 'supporting not doing'. Where providers

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have been unsuccessful in securing significant learning time, there can be an increased temptation to take the latter approach, especially where individual tutors have targets to meet.

Others are varying assessment techniques by encouraging the use of work records and diaries, or by having trainees undertake 'case studies' of particular work-based functions and activities. Increased availability of digital technology in the workplace and at provider premises is also usefully exploited in some cases.

Exploiting technology

Provider A has invested in a colour laser printer, which is used by learners to produce improved portfolio materials and illustrations. They can also borrow a digital camera, which enables them to capture work operations or the results of their work for portfolio purposes. Use of these resources also supports the development of IT key skills. The provider believes that learners appreciate the opportunity to learn these skills and that the improved presentation enhances their pride in their work.

Provider D is in the process of rolling-out NVQ Express. NVQ Express uses technology (laptop, digital camera, dictaphone etc) to provide a paper-free portfolio method of assessment, thus reducing the time spent on administration by candidates to obtain an NVQ. After each session the assessor can communicate to the learner the progress they have made towards completing the framework (eg 'now 35% complete'). This can help to motivate the learner.

Mapping learning routes and outcomes

The design of the programme must be logical and coherent: it must be clear how the desired learning outcomes are served by each component. The programme should not be, or appear to be, a set of unconnected and ad hoc learning episodes; it should be clear how each relates to the others and to the ultimate goals – what one provider refers to as 'keeping the eyes on the prize'. Learning and skills development will take place in a variety of settings – at work, on provider premises, via independent or self-directed work, in competitions, or through work or privately based social activities and interests. Each will lend itself to certain types of outcomes, and the programme design should explicitly reflect this.

Above all, it is important for their continued commitment that learners are able to understand the links between the work they do, learning for the MA framework (including key skills) and their future progress, so that they can see rationales and benefits for each activity.

Creative delivery

There is no single method to best deliver training, in order to support retention and achievement. The providers we interviewed worked on finding the right pace for individuals and for sessions. They were aware of learners' preferred learning styles; as one learner explained, although he was strongly motivated, he had an inbuilt resistance to anything that reminded him of school:

> *I want to get on a fast track to management level training – I don't want to feel I'm wasting my time, but to have a career path to success while still working. Work-based learning is right for me – I don't like learning in classroom type environments, I prefer learning from the shop floor – it is less repetitive and there is something different to learn every day. This way gives me more confidence and I feel comfortable doing it.*

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The list below is a collection of examples from the research of ways in which providers built variety and flexibility into training delivery.

Variety in training delivery

- Mixing group work and individual tutoring or support.
- Using projects and case studies which can be worked on in a range of locations (eg work, home, the training centre).
- Building on hobbies and non-work activities.
- Using work-related scenarios (eg to build key skills).
- Providing learners with experience within the provider organisation.
- Arranging external visits.
- Organising team projects with a 'challenge' or 'competitive' element.
- Supplying worksheets and work packs for learner reference.
- Inviting employer organisations to give introductions/presentations.
- Designing practical exercises with appropriate realism and scale.
- Mixing pedagogic practice, especially the reduction of 'chalk and talk' sessions where appropriate.
- Commitment to learning *and* learner-centred practice.

Technical certificates

The importance of effective training delivery is likely to be enhanced by the requirement to deliver underpinning knowledge as part of the introduction of technical certificates. In some sectors, the technical certificate route is well advanced; in others it is very much at the developmental stage. Similarly, some providers are already delivering such elements as part of their current programmes and do not foresee a problem in formalising these as the technical certificate component. For others, particularly those experiencing difficulties in securing adequate training time with trainees, supporting learners in achieving technical certificates may be more of an issue. The possibility of negotiating block releases of several days' duration to deliver and test for the technical certificates in one exercise is one option.

Succeeding with key skills

There is considerable variation in the ways in which providers address this aspect of their work. That said, the development and assessment of key skills has been one of the most difficult areas for many providers.

Effective key skills development should support better vocational learning. However, providers have three major difficulties with key skills:

- some learners would prefer to avoid key skills training because they see it as difficult and/or regard it as irrelevant to their main objective of obtaining a vocational qualification
- some employers question the relevance of key skills training, or complain that they are supporting learning that should have been achieved in the school system; they may be reluctant to give trainees time off for this kind of training
- some providers are not well equipped, in terms of staff training and programme design and delivery, to meet the key skills needs of their learners.

The ways in which providers address these difficulties depends partly on the resources available to them, and partly on the occupational area or sector in which they are working. Providers with larger teams or training budgets can more readily afford to have staff trained in key skills delivery. For example, Provider D is a local

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branch of a national provider and the company employs a key skills manager who has responsibility for ensuring that the quality of key skills delivery is maintained at a high level across all the company's centres in the UK. Providers working in areas such as business administration may find it easier to link key skills issues to workplace needs – writing business letters, for instance, or building spreadsheets.

Some providers have found it difficult to make the links between some key skills requirements and the vocational requirements of certain sectors. Hairdressing, certain kinds of manufacturing, retail and customer services are sectors where elements of key skills are perceived to be hard to integrate. These perceptions may stem from a lack of awareness of the applications of key skills. For example, most retailers use some form of computerised stock control, many hairdressers now keep computerised records for their clients, and all businesses are concerned with balancing the books. Providers G and H both faced difficulties in the shorter term in resourcing this integrated delivery and were thinking of subcontracting out this provision. A longer-term solution would be to work on the programme designs and recruit or train staff with appropriate skills and qualifications.

Promoting key skills to employers

Some employers in the childcare sector have particular difficulty in identifying how the Application of Number key skill is relevant to their trainees. Provider C tries to persuade employers by providing examples such as the calculation of staff to children ratios and minimum floor area per child and whether the staff that are promoted to deputy manager or manager positions will be responsible for handling budgets and the receipt of payments.

The relevance of key skills to the learner is vital and a point recognised by providers. There is perhaps more scope for this than some providers realise. Equally, although the various aspects of the MA framework are separately assessed, there is some flexibility in designing integrated learning programmes with connections across the different aspects. Such approaches could usefully be implemented to reinforce learning.

It was strongly apparent in this research that providers who successfully resolve these issues are in a much better position to achieve good performance, especially in terms of framework completion, than those who do not. The reasons are obvious; if the difficulties are not overcome, employer and learner commitment may suffer and learners are more likely to leave programmes prematurely. If they are retained, they are more likely to obtain NVQ qualifications but then fail to complete the framework, by neglecting to take key skills tests or by failing them.

Engaging employers in key skills development

Provider C held an employer seminar for its nursery managers and asked them to identify the non-occupational skills they would want all their employees to possess. The employer's responses identified key skills. This provided an opportunity to introduce the concept of how key skills are being integrated into the framework and how employers could help their trainees to develop these skills and pass the tests so that they can achieve the qualification.

Some providers have attempted to overcome learner and/or employer objections by providing discrete key skills modules, delivered late in the programme, often after NVQs are obtained. While this may reduce early leaving and support completion of the qualification, it still allows learners to opt out of framework achievement, and does not

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provide support for vocational learning from the key skills. It is also likely to be viewed dimly at inspection time:

> *The 'needs' of learners when they are modern apprentices are to lay the foundation for a career; not just to learn the skills for a job. The best providers develop good Key Skills at the start of the programme, when they will most help young people to grasp the technical content. They do not leave them until the end of the programme when, at best, they will be a useless burden to all concerned.*
>
> (David Sherlock, Chief Inspector of Adult Learning, 2002)

Providers who manage to integrate key skills elements closely within the overall programme from the start were more likely, in our findings, to achieve good results. This was particularly clear in the case of the provider with the strongest performance results. Examples of how key skills can be integrated within delivery processes are shown in the box below.

This approach may require considerable initial investment to integrate key skills within redesigned programmes in ways that are relevant to occupational learning and the workplace setting. However, it is likely that this investment will pay dividends in terms of framework completion.

Integrating key skills

For one provider (Provider A), 'Key skills are never allowed to become an issue, because they are delivered in one piece with everything else we do'. For example:

- assessment of key skills and accreditation of existing key skills awards or achievements is undertaken at the outset; however, prior accreditation at a certain level is not taken as a guarantee that the learner is still skilled at that level, as 'skills do not always stay current'; independent assessment is always applied
- the assessment includes use of a key skills diagnostic toolkit, 'basic & keySKILLBUILDER' (West Nottinghamshire College 2002, www.keyskillbuilder.ac.uk), which is used to identify areas for improvement
- trainees are then directed to one or more of a series of key skills work packs designed to develop key skills specifically for use in their occupational area
- in week two of the programme, trainees are given a target to produce six pieces of evidence for the NVQ and for key skills; similar monthly targets are set thereafter
- trainees produce a case study on their company which is used as key skills evidence
- additional key skills support or training will be identified and delivered either on a group or on an individual basis, as required
- key skills issues and progress are discussed with employers alongside vocational learning, at regular review sessions
- once trainees are assessed in a given area as competent to the key skills level required by their framework, they are encouraged to progress to the next level in that key skills area
- at the time of interview the training manager was undertaking Key Skills Practitioner training

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- the overall approach was to provide 'a seamless move from initial assessment to learning to testing, to demonstrating competence', with support and encouragement for the learner at all stages.

Developing delivery resources

Providers need to support good teaching and learning with appropriate resources. Resources used by providers in our research were by no means exhaustive but included, for example:

- appropriate numbers of staff, qualified and trained to the right level
- teaching rooms, private study spaces, meeting spaces
- access to food and drink from provider premises
- materials, displays, reference guides and libraries
- book and tool allowances
- IT resources – industry standard software in current versions
- machinery, tools, workshops, and other relevant equipment
- assistance with transport, where this is a particular issue.

Transition and behaviour issues

Although learners are young adults, many providers are very aware that, especially at the start of their programmes, their experience is mainly of school. They are used to a very structured environment in which they are fairly closely monitored and are expected to follow instructions. The transition from this to some work environments can be a challenging one. The move from very closely directed learning, to a learning programme where they may be expected to organise their own time and exercise more independent self-discipline, can be even more of a challenge.

Given this, some providers will explicitly discuss these changes with learners and will support them through these transitions. This is likely to involve an element of 'firmness' in dealing with some learners, including:

- challenging learner expectations that things will be 'done for them'
- ensuring that expectations of learners are maintained as regards attendance, timekeeping, attentiveness and contributions
- questioning easy excuses
- treating deadlines, learning plan targets and other objectives seriously and ensuring that failure to meet them will have consequences in terms of corrective action.

The idea here is not to create an oppressive environment, but simply to help some learners to understand the expectations of them and why these are important to their progress and achievement, and to get them to take responsibility for their own development.

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Helping learners to adjust behaviour

'One girl was working in an office, but was wearing inappropriate clothes and tended to talk quite loudly and boisterously. She was simply continuing the patterns of behaviour she had established at school and she didn't realise that the people around her would not necessarily view them as normal as she did. I had a talk with her and explained why, in the office environment, people tended to speak more quietly to avoid disturbing colleagues, and that dress conventions tended to be more conservative than "street" or leisure clothing. Once this was explained she was able to adjust her behaviour.'

The other aspect of this approach is ensuring that all learners are clear as to what is required of them at all times. Danger signs are that learners are not sure where they have reached in the programme, what they have to do next, or how much longer their programme is likely to last. Learners in this situation are more likely to become discouraged or to place less value on qualifications or framework achievement, and thus are more likely to leave before completing.

To combat this, some providers are excellent at providing clear explanations of the learner's programme, the stages involved, and the detailed tasks to be undertaken at every stage. They are likely to do this more than once, checking understanding periodically and providing reminders and signposts where needed; this can usefully link to a review of the individual learning plan and progress on this. This contrasts with the experience of some learners, and also employers, who, for example, did not know that failure to complete key skills meant that learners would only get an NVQ and not the AMA/FMA. In more extreme cases, learners did not even know that they were to have key skills exams until a week before. This meant that organising time off was very difficult, and caused significant problems with employers.

Being reliable

If the learner has responsibilities to live up to, so does the provider. It is important that the learner sees the same principles at work in provider practice as he or she is expected to live by at work and in learning situations. This means, for example:

- ensuring that work is marked and returned with appropriate comments or suggestions, promptly (some providers set time limits for this)
- arriving promptly and reliably for assessment meetings (employers and learners found it demotivating and disruptive when assessors cancelled or postponed meetings on a regular basis)
- making sure that all staff dealing with learners are appropriately informed and prepared, especially where there have been unavoidable staff changes
- remaining enthusiastic and constructive about the learner and their progress even when there are difficulties.

Understanding learner attitudes

As noted above, some providers may conduct research with learners – usually via questionnaires or individual or group interviews – to understand their perceptions, degree of satisfaction with programmes, expectations and intentions. The results, in terms of the reasons given by leavers, agreed with those reported in earlier research; a range of factors are cited, which may be programme-related, work-related or personal or family-related (Martinez 2001).

The interpretation of results requires some care – for example it is possible for high satisfaction ratings to coexist with high non-retention rates. However, such research is

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usually more generally useful in assessing broader aspects of the provider operation. More specifically in cases of early leaving, exit interviews or questionnaires can be used to ensure reasons for leaving are understood and monitored and action is taken.

Supporting learners

Providing learners with robust support is also central to retention. A range of options are open to providers in response to this. These include:

- stipulating minimum pay rates for trainees at the start of the relationship with the employer
- encouraging employers to offer pay increases after the completion of a certain number of units or after a period of time
- recognising potential restrictions (eg cultural difficulties experienced by female Asian learners attending evening provision).

Dealing with difficulties

Because of the complexity of the relationships that providers are working within, difficulties have the potential to arise from any number of sources. Providers can, to some degree, anticipate such difficulties and have systems in place so that should difficulties occur they can be logged and reviewed. This process should ideally be in place for responding to complaints, grievances or incidences of discrimination or harassment. Effective systems also record the action taken and the results. Dealing with complaints as promptly and effectively as possible is not only good practice, but is likely to be more effective in preventing dropout. It is an important, if not essential, component of learner support.

Assessors and tutors need to be aware of potential issues with family, physical and mental health, accommodation, pregnancy and relationships, or drug use. Dyslexia and dyspraxia can also be encountered, and it is important that this can be identified and that contingency plans exist for signposting to advice or referral for help where appropriate.

Preventative measures

Preventative action undertaken by Provider C involves either intensive support from the assessor (in the case of study difficulties or changing personal circumstances) or a visit from a member of the management team to discuss the issues with the learner and employer. Where there are problems in relation to employment or moving to new employers, the member of the management team with responsibility for recruitment will arrange a meeting with the employer.

Provider D uses a similar approach. If a learner is having difficulty with completing part of the framework, assessors will visit the learner more regularly. Assessors will also negotiate study time with employers so that the assessor and learner can spend time focusing on specific areas to ensure progression.

Marking and celebrating progress

As part of the emphasis on progress, many providers have found ways of acknowledging and celebrating new steps towards the completion goal, with a view to maintaining learner motivation and commitment.

This is naturally easiest when the learning plan includes realistic individual targets, and has been in continuous use by the tutor/assessor, learner and employer. In some cases, letters are written congratulating learners when targets or milestones are

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achieved, and these are usually copied to employers. As noted above, the accrediting of NVQ units is also used to ensure that learners feel they are receiving real benefit from each stage of the programme. Unit accreditation can also be used to mark the 'distance travelled' by the learner and to encourage or promote the re-entry onto a programme for early leavers. The philosophy that learners, even if they leave early, should always receive a tangible recognition of their achievement is an important 'cultural attitude' within Provider F and is embedded throughout the organisation.

Providers also use devices such as 'trainee of the month', where they celebrate, not necessarily the learner who has made most progress, but perhaps the one who has overcome a severe barrier or who has brought particular creativity and commitment to a work/programme task.

Key messages for teaching and learning

- Ensure employers provide work release time for learners (where possible employers should agree to this commitment; this can be promoted to employers in the context of the benefits it will bring to the workplace).
- Make employers aware of the implications of making insufficient learning time available to their trainees.
- Offer flexible learning and teaching opportunities to learners outside their working hours.
- Promote learning as the vehicle for success, rather than assessment.
- Employ a variety of delivery strategies in different environments to maximise learning opportunities.
- Have a clear strategy for full framework achievement and ensure that both the learner and employer have signed up to this.
- Have realistic expectation for all parties, but devise processes for helping employers and learners meet these expectations.

Taking it forward

- Providers should work collectively, with LSCs and other partners, to raise employer awareness of the need for trainee release, especially in sectors where this is a problem. Involving employers who are committed to providing dedicated time for learning in such campaigns may be most effective.
- More effective learning could be promoted by better communication between providers and subcontractors. Getting the best out of each aspect of the young person's learning programme requires planning and cooperation on the part of all concerned.
- Providers should explore potential for integrated approaches in learning programmes, within the boundaries imposed by separate assessment of the vocational qualifications and key skills.
- The use of 'e-learning' using digital computing and communication technologies has yet to develop widely among providers. With remote access facilities, specialised online learning software and appropriate support for learners, many access and scheduling barriers could be overcome.

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- Providers can help to foster related workplace activity such as workplace basic skills development – for example by working with workplace brokerage initiatives initiated by the Basic Skills Agency and being taken forward by LSCs and some Regional Development Agencies.
- Using the principle of realising learner potential, do not limit training to a given programme level – allow learners the possibility of taking additional qualifications at higher levels if appropriate.
- The role and organisation of technical certificate training will need to be factored into provider plans.
- Offer coaching or mentoring training as well as assessment support to employer staff; organise joint learner/employer training (eg on new software).
- Take more vigorous steps to understand and develop good pedagogic practice that recognises and develops the client group's attitude to learning.

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NVQ certification and framework achievement

For providers who have recruited, assessed and started learners effectively, who have continued to motivate and support them, and who have worked closely with employers, the attainment of the NVQ qualification and framework achievement should happen as the natural culmination of successful programmes.

However, for various reasons NVQ attainment is not always followed by completion of the framework. In many cases, a significant proportion of those receiving an NVQ then leave the programme without completing work for the framework. Although providers, LSCs and the ALI are aware of the issue, there is relatively little data available on this aspect of performance at national level. The Statistical First Releases produced by the DfES, for example, contain much useful information including data on qualification attainment, but do not give details of framework achievement (DfES SFR 2002).

Data for one LSC area, collected for this study (as referenced in The context under Performance issues), indicated that:

- in this area, there were pockets of success in learner retention and NVQ certification which correlated reasonably strongly with success in framework achievement (in other words, and unsurprisingly, providers that performed relatively well tended to do so on all three performance indicators). This suggests, for example, that providers who avoid dropout after NVQ certification (perhaps by avoiding a separate key skills 'hurdle' at this stage) are also good at retaining learners generally and delivering the NVQ elements
- in this area an average 46% of learners registered on FMA and AMAs achieved their NVQ at Levels 2 and 3 respectively. Across 30 providers from this area an average of only 27% then went on to achieve the full framework.

This average concealed some very good performances; in some cases almost all those obtaining NVQs went on to complete frameworks. These cases illustrate that, by embracing a mix of approaches and intervention measures, it is possible to move high proportions of learners attaining NVQ on to framework completion. Nevertheless, it is clear that many learners either fail to see sufficient benefit in proceeding to framework completion, or are deterred by additional barriers from completing.

Most providers believe that the requirement for key skills accreditation has been an important cause of dropout after receiving the NVQ. This is likely to be particularly true where learners perceive that employers are interested mainly in NVQs rather than AMAs or FMAs. MAs are better established in some sectors than in others, for a range of reasons; these may include the prior presence or absence of an apprenticeship tradition, the length of time the framework has been established, or the degree of acceptance of the framework itself by sector employers. This can affect employer views.

> *The programme that they are doing is not bad, and the provider is very helpful in working with us to fill any gaps in it, but we think it should be possible to design a framework which is a closer fit to our needs. We have been exploring the possibility of getting people in our business together to design an apprenticeship in our area [HGV fleet maintenance] which we might use nationally in our depots, using local providers – but it is rather a specialised area and we need to get advice on the process.*
>
> (Employer interview)

As noted earlier, some providers are successful at integrating key skills throughout the programme, and it is no surprise that in these cases they tended to be the providers

who successfully moved learners from NVQ attainment to framework achievement. These providers conveyed a consistent message to both learners and employers from the start; the objective of the programme is the MA, the NVQ is presented simply as a step on the way to this goal. The integration of key skills and the connections to day-to-day activities in the workplace were also more pronounced in the better performing providers.

When key skills testing takes place, especially if this happens after NVQ certification, it will be important that test results are returned quickly to learners, and that opportunities to retake tests are available within a reasonably short time, to avoid loss of momentum and learner interest.

Promoting progression

Providers often stress that an MA is about preparing for a career, not simply becoming skilled and qualified to do a job. For this reason, in some of the best cases they will encourage willing and capable learners to undertake additional learning, beyond the demands of the framework.

By the same rationale, these providers are keen that qualification and completion should not necessarily be seen as the end of the process. They encourage learners to consider progressing, either from FMA to AMA, or from AMA into one of the expanding range of work-based FE and HE options.

Stepping up support

Provider C provides more intensive support as the completion date for the trainee approaches. The nature of the support is dependent on the individual but may include, for example, extra one-to-one visits or encouraging employers to provide development opportunities. The provider also allocates LSC targets across the assessor/trainer team. The targets are analysed by the management team on a monthly basis, to ensure all trainees are on target to achieve the qualification within the timeframe set out in their learning plan. Reasons for under-performance are investigated and appropriate action is taken. This may include providing extra support for particular learners, swapping candidates between assessors or adopting a different learning approach.

Marking progress

As we have already mentioned, Provider D is in the process of rolling-out NVQ Express. The benefit of being able to tell the learner how much of the framework has been completed as a percentage is likely to have a motivating effect. Each assessor also has a workbook that lists their individual learner caseload, which units have been achieved and provides a snapshot of the assessor's workload for that moment in time. The manager reviews the workbooks to ensure that all students are progressing.

Provider B identifies 'early wins' by focusing on units of the framework that can be achieved quickly. This has the effect of bolstering confidence and demonstrates to the learner that they are progressing quickly through the framework. The provider also undertakes unit accreditation, which motivates learners to persist as they can see and celebrate progress at regular intervals.

Key messages for NVQ certification and framework achievement

- Place strategic planning as the core requirement for the delivery of key skills and for technical certificates.

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- Establish procedures for capturing and promoting progress; these should be made explicit to learners (and employers) from the outset as they can act as a catalyst for achievement.
- Provide support structures to help learners make the transition from one programme to the next.
- Celebrate success and share these stories to motivate others.

Taking it forward

- Progression options can be made explicit from the start; this will enable learners and/or employers to identify any additional learning relating to the progression opportunity, rather than the needs of the current programme. Where learners are able to do so, with employer support, these additional activities can be added to learning plans.
- Providers can benefit learners towards the end of programmes by strengthening progression advice, guidance, and links to sources of information and courses.

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Leadership and management

Inspections and commentaries place considerable emphasis on provider leadership and management. This research supports this assumption and validates the notion that the management and culture of the organisation are important factors underlying successful performance.

Once again it is necessary to recognise the variety of provider organisations and their operational contexts. Private providers may be single-site organisations where the owners work as part of the team, or national organisations where a central management team makes strategy and operational policy for delivery teams in many local sites. Some providers are essentially the training departments of employer organisations, some form training arms of local authorities, and some of course are FE colleges. Providers may focus on a single occupation or sector, or offer a wide range of programmes; they may select learners, or attempt to cater for all comers. All of these factors will influence management styles and organisational cultures.

Are there, however, general principles or guidelines for the development of management practice and organisational culture which can be used to support performance? The research conducted here would suggest that there are some facets of leadership and management that can have a strong influence on learner outcomes.

Retaining learners

Earlier paragraphs have demonstrated that various teaching and learning strategies can be employed to improve learner outcomes. Retention per se also requires very clear direction from management.

Early leavers, who drop out of programmes in the very early stages, are among the biggest group of non-completers. The retention issue centres mainly on ensuring that learners stay in programmes long enough to make some progress. Learners who survive these early stages usually stay with programmes to the NVQ assessment and accreditation stage, and in most cases will then obtain the qualification. Research in further education and work-based learning has identified a range of stages or 'quit points', at which learners are more likely to leave. The specific points depend to some extent on the programme structure but are concentrated in the early stages (Thornhill 2001) and at stress points such as the first assignment, after holidays, or as final assessments loom (DfEE 1999).

Beyond this critical point in the programme, framework completion and achievement of the MA appears to become the most vulnerable stage. Early leavers are the single biggest group of non-completers. Overall non-completion rates are high and most of these learners will leave without achieving any significant formal recognition of their involvement in the programme.

There may be positive reasons for leaving; as noted in earlier research, there may be a significant 'distance travelled' between their skills and capabilities on entry and those on leaving programmes. Around 50% of learners obtained at least one NVQ (ALI 2002), meaning that roughly half the learners entering work-based learning leave programmes – usually prematurely – without obtaining a full qualification.

> *Non-completion does not necessarily mean that trainees have not achieved at all. There are also outcomes which are not directly related to qualifications; for example, over a quarter of early leavers remain with the same employer who originally offered them the apprenticeship and about 20% go on to do similar*

work with a different employer. DfES follow-up studies suggest that satisfaction about the programme from both young people and employers is high.

(Hughes 2002)

Occupational and sectoral factors play a significant part in determining non-completion levels. For example, high turnover and job mobility is a feature of sectors such as hairdressing and construction, and providers report that retail has many younger learners who have not really made up their minds what kind of career they want to pursue, and see retail as a good choice while 'taking stock' of their options. Seasonal work in the hospitality industry is another predictable pressure on successful completion. Nevertheless, good providers believe that they can make an impact on retention figures by applying appropriate monitoring and action.

Proactive retention

Effective retention policies are proactive and involve the whole of the provider team, from senior management to tutors. In the best examples there is a clear corporate objective to improve retention, in some cases with targets set for the year, and a clear action plan to achieve this. This is then reviewed regularly and actions adjusted accordingly – a process that normally includes regular staff team discussions of the issue.

Knowing retention risks

By analysis of learner records providers can identify patterns and timings of dropout in some detail. Where this is done it enables the provider to identify risk areas – for example, these may relate to learner characteristics, particular stages in the programme, seasonal factors, or specific employers or sectors.

Monitoring and analysis of this type provides a systematic basis for organising interventions designed to reduce dropout. If it shows that, for example, females in certain programmes are most likely to leave 3 months after starting the programme, then the details of the programme can be examined to check for explanatory factors; female learners can be interviewed to research their perceptions and motivations at this stage; and further data can be collected and analysed (eg on destinations). Similarly, if mainly male learners in a specific sector are not completing, investigation can centre on a range of possible causes including those associated with gender and those particular to that sector.

Adjustments to the programme or to provider systems and practices can then be made to minimise the problem; for example, it may be effective to provide more support to learners at this stage, to enable them to examine their options more clearly.

Analysing and dealing with early leaving

In one provider, analysis of leaver data showed that there was an unacceptably large proportion of non-completers. A project was organised to discuss the issue with staff, learners and other providers. Possible ways forward were then discussed within the team and with the local contract manager, and changes to recruitment and induction practices were made, such as initial assessment systems and the subsequent placement on the most appropriate programme for individual learners. These proved effective and the proportion of early leavers dropped by 10%.

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Adjusting the recruiting process

One major alteration to the recruitment process, adopted by some providers, is to delay formal programme starts for a week or two so that learners and provider can build experience of each other and the programme. The learner, with the provider, can then assess whether they are likely to want to remain on the programme, and if not can be redirected as appropriate before they formally start the programme. There is a cost to the provider, since learners before the formal start are not counted for LSC funding purposes, but some providers find it worthwhile to sustain this to prevent subsequent low retention rates.

As well as this systematic and proactive type of measure, providers use a variety of more ad hoc methods of identifying and dealing with individuals or groups of learners who are 'at risk' of dropping out of programmes. These include, for example, circulation of 'at risk sheets' identifying likely leavers with notes on the circumstances, or, in another case, the use of the 'traffic light' system where possible leavers were graded green, amber or red according to the likelihood of their leaving.

In addition, effective linkages between the course tutor, assessors and internal verifiers can be a significant aid in identifying learners who may be 'at risk'. For example, internal verifiers at Provider H are trained to identify potential 'at risk' learners through the quality of the evidence they produce for portfolios. Any concerns are then fed back to the course tutor and steps can be taken to resolve issues. The effectiveness of this measure depends upon the frequency and thoroughness of the internal verification process.

The common feature of effective methods of this second type is that they allow team discussion of the cases, and team coordination of resulting actions. They are useful 'second-line' approaches to individual cases, and over time can also generate information to feed into the more systematic approach outlined above.

When intervening in individual cases to try to prevent early leaving, providers normally conduct assessor or management discussions with the learner, and may also talk to the employer and even to parents if appropriate. Providers F and H try to enforce mandatory participation by employers so that issues can be resolved quickly.

Some providers, when asked how they worked to maximise learner retention, went beyond specific measures of this type and explained how their whole approach to working with the learner was designed to maintain learner commitment and, just as important, clarity and confidence about the way forward. Some aspects of this are discussed below.

An extensive range of measures taken by one provider is illustrated in the box below.

Maximising retention – a range of measures

Within a single provider organisation (Provider D) a range of complementary measures are used to maximise learner retention.

- **Visit report form (VRF)** – a form is used to summarise progress and issues arising at every visit. The learner, employer and assessor all sign the form and receive a copy. The provider manager collates the forms and any unresolved issues are followed-up on a monthly basis. The VRF has resulted in a fundamental change in the employer–provider relationship. Prior to this the relationship was more contractual in nature and the employer was less engaged in the learning process.

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- **Staff meeting** – assessors meet weekly to identify potential leavers/problem areas and decide on appropriate action. This may result in the manager visiting an employer, additional learning sessions for a particular trainee, or swapping assessors.
- **Learner tracking** – a database system is used to track learner progress. Queries can be used to assess how many students have completed specific units of the NVQ, when reviews are due/completed and the target dates for completion.
- **Additional learner support** – assessors will normally visit learners once every 4 weeks. If a learner is having difficulty with completing part of the framework, assessors will provide more intensive support by visiting the learner more regularly. Assessors will also negotiate study time with employers so that the assessor and learner can spend a couple of hours focusing on specific areas to ensure progression.
- **Access to support** – all assessors have company mobile phones and learners are encouraged to phone assessors if they are having problems either with the FMA/AMA programme, work issues or other issues that are having an impact on their ability to work/study.
- **Unit accreditation** – while unit accreditation uses more resources on the part of the provider, it has a role in motivating learners by demonstrating that they are progressing towards completing the framework. It is especially beneficial for those learners who hit a 'sticky' patch or require additional support.
- **Mentoring** – the provider is developing a national mentoring programme to provide additional support and encouragement to learners, on a voluntary basis, from someone who is outside the work training environment.
- **Staff training** – all assessors are enrolled on a course that covers learning style identification. This helps assessors to 'tune-in' to preferred styles of learning and helps to ensure that the trainee is learning at the right level of the framework.
- **Evaluation** – employers and learners are sent an evaluation questionnaire by post once a quarter. This gives a mechanism for providing feedback outside the normal assessor/employer/learner relationship. Assessors also take forms directly to employers and learners. Importantly the learners can see that their feedback is acted upon.

Recapturing 'leavers'

Even where all preventative measures have failed, and learners have left programmes early, some providers work hard to recover the situation. Many learners will stay with the same employer, and may be willing to rejoin programmes, or join a different programme, after some time. If leaving has been associated with health or family difficulties, again it may be worthwhile contacting them again when difficulties may have been resolved. Where they join a new employer, there is an opportunity to re-engage them in learning with the support or agreement of the new workplace. This depends on the provider's willingness and capability to track leavers and make new approaches.

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Logging destinations and following up leavers

Provider B keeps a log of leaver destinations, where this is known, and leavers are followed up at regular intervals to ascertain whether they are considering rejoining their existing programme or have moved to a new employer/occupational area where the provider can be of assistance. A dogged, persistent approach is required to make this work pay off.

A difficulty in recent arrangements has been that LSC records treat each programme start as a separate episode, even when they involve the same individual. Therefore, a 'recovered' early leaver as described above will remain a retention failure in the performance analysis, though they may represent a retention success. The same problem can arise when, possibly as part of a retention strategy, learners leave one programme but join another, which may suit them better – this actually generates an early leaving episode in the performance data for the original programme. Placing the learner at the heart of the work-based learning process should, however, mean that providers take a responsive approach to this and secure the best possible outcome for each learner.

Supporting the staff team

Leadership and management also has a responsibility to those delivering the learning. So, in addition to developing systems and approaches that enable learners to stay on programme, providers have to consider their staff.

The most significant investment made by most providers is in staff, and this is the resource that usually has the biggest impact on performance. Providers across the spectrum of performance have faced difficulties in recruiting and retaining good staff. One reported having lost two staff in the last year – 'they had been here 4 years and 7 years respectively but got fed up with all the changes and the pressure'. Other providers are facing upheaval because of merging and consolidation of provider organisations, or from overhauls designed to enhance performance.

Developing tutors and assessors

It is important that staff with a training/tutoring role receive training to enable them to more effectively help trainees to learn. Provider C ensures that employees who are recruited to the assessor/tutor role achieve the relevant teaching qualification at the earliest opportunity (if the qualification is not already held). Provider D enrols all new assessors on a course that covers learning style identification. This helps assessors to 'tune-in' to the trainee's preferred style of learning and also helps to ensure that the trainee is learning at the right level of the framework.

The box below is a collection of principles used by providers in meeting these challenges to develop and support the staff team.

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Guidelines for staff development and support

When recruiting staff we look first of all for the right attitude – the positive, can-do attitude that we have as an organisation – we can upgrade their skills if necessary, once they join.

We ensure that we are reflecting our equal opportunities policy in our dealings with staff as well as with learners and employers.

It is important to encourage staff to innovate, contribute ideas, share learning and good practice – distribute course information, and present on results.

Our staff have regular appraisals including a review of their job description and an amendment of this if necessary; this guides training and development planning in the light of company objectives, in line with our Investors in People certification.

As well as reviewing and ensuring appropriate training and qualifications, we try to recruit people with relevant industry experience, and to update this whenever we have an opportunity.

Quality teaching and learning needs to be enhanced through staff development that emphasises pedagogical understanding, say, through buying in INSET provision from the LEA or education consultants.

Some providers are working towards a situation where all staff involved in key skills provision have Key Skills Practitioner Awards, or have accreditation in Key Skills to at least Level 3. Staff development also involves ensuring that staff have assessor qualifications.

Managing the team – leadership

It has already been argued in the context of individual and staff team development that the quality and performance of the provider team are vital to success. These will depend not only on the qualities and skills of team members, but also on the quality of the leadership. The work of a work-based learning provider is demanding, complex and fast moving, and good leadership is vital in setting the standards and expectations for the rest of the organisation. This means a person, or group of people, who have oversight, not only of the organisational strategy and operations, but also of the key principles underlying the work, and the quality of the team's performance. They must have the will and the ability to keep the team on track through changes and challenges, as well as ensuring that the operation meets its commercial objectives.

Developing the team structure

Provider C is developing the management structure of the company as it expands. A small management team consisting of the recruitment manager, training manager and quality manager has been established. The provider is in the process of recruiting three training coordinators who will fulfil a line management responsibility for assessors/trainers working across the four LSC areas.

Two-way team communication

Providers where staff feel that they have a significant input to the organisation are more likely to have a sense of collective responsibility and therefore to engender gains in retention and achievement.

One of the components of effective team management is, naturally enough, good communication, normally based on regular staff meetings. Whether by means of meetings or using other methods, management of the team is not, in the best

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examples, a one-way, top-down process. It provides good opportunities for staff to respond or input their own issues or suggestions.

> *We have a main, weekly meeting to discuss general issues and developments. Every morning we also have a short meeting of all staff to review the tasks for the day and what we aim to achieve. We will also review the same things for the previous day so we can pick up any shortfalls. We see it as very important because it ensures that everybody is clear about what he or she is doing and how it fits into the whole. Then they are in a position to tell the team about any issues or implications. In general, we encourage staff to come up with their own ideas about how things might be improved, and where we agree they look promising we will put resource in place to follow up ideas and develop them into new processes or practice.*
>
> (Provider interview)

These, or similar methods, can also ensure that longer-term team goals can be set and reviewed, and that the team remains focused on the needs and progress of learners throughout.

Integrating external team members

'The team' may not only be directly employed managers, administrators, tutors and assessors. Many providers also employ freelance contributors to deal with specialist issues or to vary the programme to add interest for learners. Some also subcontract delivery to other providers.

Using subcontractors had been a source of problems for some of the providers. They tended, logically enough, to appoint subcontractors to deliver in areas where the main provider lacked expertise or resources. This meant, however, that it could be difficult for the main provider to assess and ensure the quality of subcontractor arrangements and delivery. In one case this led to significant adjustments to the arrangements (see box below).

Identifying and resolving a subcontracting problem

A provider subcontracted provision in three occupational areas to local colleges. Feedback monitoring and analysis of performance showed that the programmes delivered in these areas were unsatisfactory. Initially the provider attempted to work with the colleges to improve provision. When this proved inadequate, the provider took over delivery in two of the areas; learner feedback indicates that the training provided has improved significantly. In the third area, it was reluctantly decided to move learners to another college where provision was regarded as better. To enable learners to travel greater distances to the new location, the provider has arranged transport where necessary.

The challenge for providers is to establish subcontracting arrangements, which, as far as possible, integrate the subcontracted provision within the overall provider operation. This is likely to involve, for example:

- ensuring that subcontractor equal opportunity and quality assurance policies and practice are adequate to meet the provider standards
- establishing clear and enforceable service agreements
- good information flows between provider and subcontractor (and learner/employer)
- monitoring subcontractor performance and providing feedback as required

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- linkage of complaints and grievance procedures to allow early identification of any issues and prompt, coordinated action.

Setting strategic priorities

In some cases providers have had to take a strategic decision involving a change of location and recognise that this could impact upon learner retention and achievement. For example, Provider E will be rescinding their subcontracting arrangements, which results in students having to make much longer journeys with an unreliable public transport system. Learners themselves were particularly worried about increased journey times, and a few questioned whether they would continue with their learning should this be the case. However, the decision is felt to be justified by the overall improvement in the quality of provision that is expected as a result of the change.

Building effective partnerships

Beyond subcontractors, successful providers are also likely to build wider partnerships and networks. In some cases these can be operational alliances with a subcontracting element (see box below).

An innovative alliance

A hairdressing provider (Provider A) found that trainees were apt to move salons very readily, for as little as 50p an hour more pay. In many cases they moved to salons that worked with another local hairdressing provider (Provider B). These learners represented early leavers for Provider A, and new starts for Provider B, where they would have to repeat the processes of assessment and induction.

Provider A has the option of persuading learners to remain on their programme. However, this would be likely to affect relations with Provider B, who may not welcome Provider A staff working in 'their' salons. It would also be more complex for the salon, which would have to deal with two providers instead of one.

To rationalise this situation, Provider A is working with B to agree a new approach. They propose that the learner remains on Provider A's programme, but that they pay Provider B to undertake liaison and monitoring (to Provider A's standards).

This arrangement will:

- encourage learners to continue with their programmes by simplifying transition
- improve Provider A's retention rate
- provide additional income for Provider B
- remain simple for employers.

Other contacts are also important, for example networking via LSC hosted groups, good practice networks, or representation on policy or operational development bodies. These activities enable providers to share and learn of good practice, generate ideas, make representations, and be influential in shaping new developments. The senior managers of both Provider C and Provider D are involved in extensive networking, for example in early years partnerships, awarding body committee, DfES Technical Certificates working group, nursery employer groups, LSC provider networks. The principle is that if you are 'ahead of the game' you can influence the process, plan ahead and warm-up employers before an issue becomes mandatory.

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Developing the organisation

Change is very much a fact of life in the work-based learning sector, and seems likely to remain so for some time. Managing change is therefore key to success. Management in most providers have a significant task to monitor changes in, for example, funding regimes, to understand the implications of these and to make decisions on how the organisation will need to adjust to them.

As well as changes affecting the contractual environment, there will be changes in sector or employer needs. These are often mid to longer-term issues, although conditions can change quite quickly, for example in response to legislation. Providers need to monitor the sectors in which they work, to identify likely sources of change, and to adjust their strategic planning accordingly. This might involve, for example, diversification into new areas, formation of new alliances, the development of new training offers or the merger of providers.

Reflecting on practice

We have noted in several contexts that good providers are continually looking for improvement. They value creativity and innovation in their staff as well as in learners. They are also willing to take some time to reflect on their own practice. Provider H, for example, blocks out time in diaries for provider staff in each sector to share good practice through team meetings and other informal gatherings.

As part of this they need to be willing to undertake honest identification of weak areas. Self-assessment reports for inspections are not the only rationale for this. It is the foundation of effective improvement and quality assurance. It is notable that inspection reports for providers with good performance are sometimes less critical of the organisation than its own self-assessment has been.

Reflecting on induction

As part of a process of discussion and reflection leading up to the production of the self-assessment, training staff recognised that trainees recruited directly by employers, rather than by the provider, had lower levels of recollection and understanding of induction. These trainees represented only 7% of all trainees, and the problem had gone unnoticed hitherto. Changes were quickly made to the induction process to strengthen arrangements for these trainees and to ensure that all starters received the same high quality induction.

Key messages for leadership and management

- Proactive retention means and measures need to be established and implemented.
- Management information systems can provide a useful source and confirmation of periods of early dropout; a range of strategies should be devised to counter this.
- Develop approaches that allow learners to gain some recognition for what they have achieved; this has the potential to encourage a return to learning and boost confidence and morale.
- Provide continuous professional development for staff to maximise successful learner outcomes; this can also engender a sense of loyalty in staff and promote staff retention.
- Formalise subcontractor relationships and devise common approaches to quality assurance.

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- Be creative in how you deliver your learning – working in collaboration with other stakeholders can sustain current ventures and provide new opportunities.
- Ensure you are aware of the current and pending developments in the field.
- As a provider, adopt a process of reflective practice as a means of securing continuous improvement.

Taking it forward

- Learners who have left programmes early may after some time be in a position to resume; rejoining incentives can be offered to encourage them to return to learning.
- Names of leavers who have moved outside the area can be passed to LSCs and providers in the new area (providers will need to be aware of data protection implications).
- The new Connexions card will be issued to all 16–19 year olds and can be used, with a card reader, to record and support attendance.
- As the Cassels report (2001) points out, entering trainees to skills competitions can be an excellent way of fostering skills development and teamwork, and can also create examples to be followed by other trainees and employees. UK Skills coordinates a network of competitions in conjunction with employers, providers and representative bodies.
- Unit accreditation can be used to reward early leavers and to 'leave the door open for them'. In addition, administering leaver questionnaires and acting upon the results via staff team discussions can improve practice, and, thereby, retention and achievement.
- Formally accredit staff competence through The National Occupational Standards for Learning and Development, Employment National Training Organisation (ENTO 2002).

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Summary: Maximising performance

Some of the performance improvement measures undertaken by providers across major areas of their work-based learning operation have been presented. The question that remains is: What are the implications for providers seeking to review and improve their own performance?

It is evident from the range of work being undertaken that there is *no single 'magic answer'* that providers can use to solve all performance problems. It is true that some providers have produced useful performance gains by adjusting one aspect of the operation (eg by having learners undertake a pre-start period before they are formally entered onto the programme, reducing early leaving). However, not all providers are in a position to resource such measures, and it is debatable that all would derive similar benefit in performance terms. It also remains likely that further improvements could be made by examining and adjusting approaches in other areas of the provider's work.

Providers regard effective work on performance as a *continuous and overarching* process. Single actions or changes to operations, far reaching though they may be, are only part of an ongoing management and team effort across all areas of the provider's work. Just as the style, quality, price and reliability of a given car depend on the efforts of many design, manufacturing and commercial teams within the producer's organisation, good work-based learning performance reflects the work of the whole provider operation.

Work on performance improvement therefore needs to be part of a *coherent, integrated and sustained campaign* across all aspects of the organisation's work. It should:

- be made explicit in documentation
- be familiar to all staff
- be based on inputs from staff, learners and employers, as well as managers
- include plans to commit or develop the necessary resources
- include indicators, schedules, milestones and targets
- provide for regular assessment, review and adjustment
- have clear links to other management and development strategies.

Individual providers facing this task will be starting from many different points. Some may have the potential to make significant improvements in performance; for others, who are already performing well, the challenge may be to maintain performance or achieve small gains.

As already noted, some may face particular difficulties arising from the sector or occupational area in which they work – yet this should not mean that they abdicate responsibility for seeking improvements wherever they can be found.

Making the investment

It must be recognised that cost is likely to be an issue for many providers. Some work to improve performance may actually decrease costs, for example by eliminating wasteful activity, or improve income by increasing retention. However, activities such as training and qualifying staff, enhancing initial assessment, or working more regularly with employers, will have cost implications. The extent to which such investments are productive, in a commercial sense, will depend in any given year on the funding regime and its details. Clearly there is a need for LSC regimes to support performance improvement, by facilitating effective provider investment of this type.

Many of the providers interviewed felt that improvements could be made to the current arrangements.

Some funding issues

'We understand that standard lengths of stay were introduced to address previous difficulties where learners were hanging around on programmes forever or being squeezed through too quickly. But under the present arrangement, if a learner is keen to complete quickly, and able to do it, we don't want to hold them back needlessly – and we won't. We think this is good practice. But if they complete in less than two thirds of the standard time, we will lose out – we will only be paid for the actual time on programme, rather than the full programme fee. In effect we are being penalised for our good practice, which we can demonstrate results in excellent performance relative to the rest of the sector and in national terms. We need greater flexibility to vary the standard length of stay, or the funding rate, in appropriate circumstances.'

'Only £200 of the fee is output related. This covers very little in the way of additional staff training, learner support and tracking. For example we used to work weekends when needed to support achievement and track learners – we can't afford to do that now. For many providers this also means that it's not so much an issue, when they recruit, whether learners are likely to achieve and complete – it doesn't affect them so much financially. That might explain some of the fall in inspection grades.'

The Adult Learning Inspectorate is clearly aware that the costs of work-based learning can be an issue for providers. In his review of 2001/02 inspection results (ALI 2002), David Sherlock alludes to it:

> *There are outstanding small providers and several of them are among the top 24. It is certainly problematic for contract managers and inspectors alike to make sound judgements which seek to discriminate between providers which rely wholly on state funding, and those for which it is an undefined part of total expenditure. However, it seems reasonable to wonder whether the increasingly complex demands implied by Sir John Cassels' recommendations ... on the reform of modern apprenticeships, including the introduction of Technical Certificates, can be sustained by small organisations without more substantial support.*

After noting the possibilities of models such as the group training association, local sector based consortia, or 'clusters' of small providers sharing management facilities, the discussion concludes that:

> *it would be a tragedy to lose opportunities ... merely by the application of some bureaucratic rule about size. Inspection evidence suggests, however, that excellence is increasingly likely to be attained by those who have access to funds and resources greater than those solely associated with their training activities.*
>
> (ALI 2002, Commentary: Lessons from Success)

Ultimately, the implication is that funders and policy-makers will need to decide what kind of provider infrastructure they want, and how this can support efforts to minimise costs and maximise performance at local and national levels.

Setting priorities and timescales

It has been argued here that work on performance is a *continuous and overarching* process, that is, one which is implemented throughout the learning experience and which affects all aspects of that experience; however, providers will have to start

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somewhere. Exactly where will depend on their starting point. If they have an existing performance strategy, it might be a question of re-examining it to identify gaps or weak areas. But in the absence of any prior work, are there areas that should be regarded as priorities? To conclude, some brief suggestions for areas for short, middle and longer-term development as part of a new performance strategy are offered. These are intended as general indications, not as a detailed recipe for all providers. Individual provider priorities will reflect existing organisational strategies, needs and resources, and the nature of the desired impact on performance.

Short-term priorities

In the short term (the current year) providers can maximise performance by focusing on the following areas:

- specific actions to retain learners (eg identifying those at risk of dropping out and responding to that prior to it coming to fruition)
- initial assessment and planning which focuses on understanding and meeting learner needs (eg matching learner needs, desires and requirements to the programme of learning they enter)
- induction which gives the learner the necessary information to provide a clear view of his or her work-plan and responsibilities
- effective key skills training which is not seen as irrelevant by learners or employers; this could, for example, mean the wholesale integration of key skills and/or the adoption of a project-based approach to key skills attainment
- teaching and learning which has a rationale which is clear to the learner, is delivered by appropriate methods, and which links to workplace activities
- effective support to learners which responds to additional learning and support needs
- close cooperation with employers
- good assessment and verification.

Something may be achieved in any or all of these areas by adjusting current practice. Initially the selection of actions may be somewhat ad hoc, according to staff awareness of issues and any learner and/or employer input which is currently implemented. Wherever action can be taken, its effectiveness should be assessed and the lessons drawn for longer-term work.

Mid-term adjustments

Over a longer timescale (eg to adjust approaches in the coming contract year), it may be necessary to implement broader changes. This may, for example, include alterations to job roles and descriptions, or the implementation of retention or equal opportunities monitoring and analysis systems. These will support the short-term activities and lay a sound basis for further development work. Over this kind of period, it should also be possible to identify performance issues in a more systematic way (although comprehensive systems for monitoring and assessment may still be lacking), and to consult on and develop the performance strategy in a more formal fashion.

Long-term strategy

Longer-term actions will be designed to establish performance review and improvement as a core team activity, using the lessons learned from short-term work. This is likely to take place over one or more years of operation, in the initial development and assessment phase, and then on an ongoing basis with regular

reviews and adjustments. Within this, specific strands of action are likely to address structural issues such as:

- redesign of programmes to integrate key skills and/or incorporate new teaching and learning approaches
- new training and qualifications programmes for staff
- establishment of data collection and analysis systems to support retention and quality assurance work (eg earlier leaver questionnaires and/or feedback processes)
- new management and two-way team communication arrangements to facilitate the speed, accuracy and effectiveness of organisational response
- planning resources and the establishment of the necessary commercial foundation for new investments
- strategic adjustments such as diversification into new occupations or areas of learning, formation of alliances or consortia, or expansion onto new sites
- entry into provider networks or work with representative or developmental bodies, to enhance the organisation's wider presence and intelligence.

These will indicate that the task of performance improvement is not, ultimately, separable from the overall organisational strategy, and needs to be seen in this context.

Appendix A: Work-based learning – interview schedule

Note to interviewer

This 'Challenge Framework' interview presents the interviewee with opportunities to describe key strategies and actions to support performance. This is done by qualitative questioning and discussion under each of the main headings, using the prompt list provided. It also assesses providers against some key practices, which one might expect to be in place for good providers. These assessments are made by you by rating agreement with the numbered, boxed statements as follows:

1 – strongly agree
2 – agree
3 – disagree
4 – strongly disagree

After each rating, in the Example box, you should note key evidence or other explanations of your rating – please enter key words, examples or statements here and expand as necessary in your accompanying interview note. Please complete assessments and examples during or immediately after the interview wherever possible. After the general question and answer/discussion for each topic area, it is permissible to ask the associated rating questions directly to ensure that no relevant information has been missed.

Interviewee details

Provider	
Interviewer	
Interview date	
Name	
Title	
Subject area(s)	
Responsibilities	

Provider and programme characteristics

Provider type, details
Types: general college, specialist college, private, employer, local authority (also whether local company or branch of regional/national org.)
Sectoral focus
Programme size and types (AMA, FMA, NVQ)
Learner characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, employment status, prior achievements)
Recent performance (their figures for NVQ and framework achievement)
Sectoral/framework issues
Subcontracting or other inter-provider arrangements
Inspection status (when and which organisation, and when expected)

Key questions

Why do some learners leave and some complete?
Why do some succeed and some fail?
What are the most important things you do to support completion and success?
How might current practice be improved?
What are the cost and resource implications?

Performance

Does the provider have a good track record in terms of retention of students?
Does the provider have a good track record in terms of successful completion of:

- NVQs
- MA frameworks
- Key skills
- Individual learning plans

Does the company have a strategy for improving successful completion, which includes specific targets for improvement?

Staff commitment to improvement

1. Staff are aware of recent performance figures and use data to analyse trends and spot potential problems	
Example:	
2. Staff are aware of issues associated with recent performance and are encouraged to take steps to improve retention and achievement	
Example:	

Reaching and engaging learners

Targeting the right learners for the programme
Matching recruits to the right programme
Liaison with Connexions/guidance links
Selecting learners for the programme
Inducting learners – information/events
Initial assessments and needs analysis
Identifying key skills needs
'Pre-start' events or programmes
Tailoring plans/programmes to meet individual needs
Individual learning plans or wider individual plans
Explaining funding to learners

Reaching and engaging employers

Recruiting employers
Selling the framework
Involving employers in recruitment and selection
How selective are employers?
Inducting employers
Explaining funding to employers

3. The provider ensures that learners enter programmes which they wish to pursue and which are appropriate for them	
Example:	
4. Learners are fully informed and prepared for the demands of the programme after induction	
Example:	
5. The provider ensures that employers are aware of and committed to their roles and responsibilities in support of the learner The provider supports the employer to do this There is an effective system for dealing with problems employers experience with learners' performance	
Example:	
6. The provider ensures that learners and employers see framework completion as the key goal of the programme	
Example:	

Monitoring and supporting retention and learner progress

Retaining learners
Monitoring attendance
Identifying early leaving risks; at-risk profiles or risk points in programmes
Resolving issues early
Course or placement transfer to support retention
Leaving contemplation questions (to identify factors behind early leaving)
Withdrawal interviews
Reasons for withdrawal
Tracking non-completers

7. The provider identifies non-completion risks and takes timely action to retain learners There are supportive exit procedures which recognise early leavers' achievements and provide advice on next steps	
Example:	

Supporting learners – who and how?
Learner satisfaction and feedback
Dealing with complaints
Liaison with employers on support issues
Setting and adjusting expectations

Milestones and progress recognition
Use of bonuses or incentives
Flexibility – dealing with transitions (home, employer, programme etc)
Parent liaison
Dealing with attendance issues – letters, calls, discussions

8. The provider actively seeks to be aware of learner attitudes and any issues experienced, and to foster satisfaction and commitment There is a clear link between learner review, pastoral care and learning support, which is used to gain feedback on learners' views on their progress	
Example:	
9. The provider actively seeks to be aware of employer attitudes and any issues experienced, and to foster satisfaction and commitment	
Example:	

Quality of teaching and learning

Design of programme delivery – who, how?
Intensity and level of demands on the learner
Developing study skills
Integrating key skills – development, delivery, integration, value
Learning strategies used
Portfolio building
Provision of any additional support on/off job
The learning episode – type, range, frequency, aims
Extent of tutor/learner contact
Provider based learning settings and methods
Destinations and progression (tracking)

10. The learning programme is well designed and provides an appropriate and well integrated mix of work-based and other learning opportunities	
Example:	

The staff–learner relationship
The staff–employer relationship
The learner–employer relationship
Learner–learner relationships
Establishing peer groups and peer support
Continuity in relationships
Mentoring

11. Relationships develop and remain constructive and supportive; issues can be dealt with effectively as they arise	
Example:	

Preparing for assessment
Key skills – assessment
Accreditation
Integrating non-NVQ learning (or technical certificates in the future)
NVQ award – process
Retaining for framework completion
Awards ceremonies – are there any, at what stage?
Progression links

12. The organisation of the assessment and accreditation process supports the aim of framework completion	
Example:	
13. Progress and framework achievement are celebrated and learners are encouraged to achieve in other ways and to progress after framework completion	
Example:	

Staffing and funding for good practice

Resources
Staff development – training and feedback on retention and achievement strategies
Using performance data for improvement

14. The right equipment and resources are in place at the workplace and in other learning settings	
Example:	
15. Staff are appropriately skilled and qualified and are supported in development to meet new challenges	
Example:	

Equal opportunities

How is equality of opportunity and treatment assured?
How is quality in programme design, delivery and assessment assured?
How are the particular issues relating to learners from minority groups addressed to secure their successful completion?
How is the awareness of equal opportunities raised – learners, staff, employers?

16. Equality of opportunity and delivery quality are actively monitored and assured	
Example:	

Effective management of programmes

By how much (%) could provider action boost learner retention, achievement and framework completion?
Who has responsibility for learner retention, achievement and framework completion?
Are there performance targets for the provider?
Are there performance targets for this programme?
How realistic are these?
Is there an explicit performance improvement strategy?
Objectives? Measures? Monitoring?
Who reviews and develops the improvement plan?
What impact has the improvement plan had?
Benchmarking
Programme planning and budgeting
Programme reviews
Feedback and response on programme effectiveness
Consistency of staff, programmes and environment
Clear staff roles and responsibilities
Effective and regular liaison between all concerned in learner support

17. A SMART performance improvement plan is implemented by staff	
Example:	
18. The commercial management of the operation is consistent with learner and employer interests and performance improvement	
Example:	

Links and partnerships

Is good practice shared/sought?
Guidance links
Other provider links
Employer body links

19. Good practice is actively developed, identified and shared internally and externally	
Example:	
20. Relationships with partner organisations are constructive and inter-working is appropriate and effective	
Example:	

Core values

On the basis of the *interviews with provider staff* please provide your assessment of **organisational** core values by providing a rating 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree) for each statement as follows:

	Rating
21. The learner is treated as an individual and is central to every aspect of the programme or intervention	
22. Staff have a positive regard for learners and treat them with respect	
23. Learners are actively engaged as partners in the learning project	
24. Staff have high expectations regarding learner achievement, coupled with realism and honesty	
25. All staff show a continuing commitment to high quality	
26. The treatment of both learners and staff exemplifies good equal opportunities practice	
Examples of Core Values ratings:	

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raising quality
and achievement
programme

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- We aim to reach all colleges and work-based learning providers.
- We offer extra support to colleges and work-based learning providers that are receiving Standards Fund money to improve their practice.
- All our activity themes are backed by a programme of research and evaluation.
- The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is funded by a grant to the Learning and Skills Development Agency from the Learning and Skills Council.

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